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THE FREE LANCES.

THE FREE LANCES.

A ROMANCE OF THE MEXICAN VALLEY.

BY
CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON :
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THE FREE LANCES.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WOMAN'S SCHEME.

“Y poor Ruperto is indeed in danger !
Now I am sure of it. Ah ! even
to his life ! And I may be the
cause of his losing it.”

So spoke the Countess Almonté, half in
soliloquy, though beside her sat her friend

Luisa Valverde. They were in a carriage on return from their fruitless visit to the Dictator. It was the Countess' own landau, which had remained waiting for them outside the Palace gates.

The other, absorbed with her own anxieties, might not have noticed what was said but for its nature. This, being in correspondence with what was at the moment in her own mind, caught her ear, almost making her start. For she, too, was thinking of a life endangered, and how much that danger might be due to herself. It was not poor Ruperto's life, but poor Florencio's.

"You the cause, Ysabel!" she said not in surprise, save at the similarity of their thoughts. "Ah! yes; I think I comprehend you."

"If not, *amiga*, don't ask explanation of it now. It's a hateful thing, and I dislike

to think, much more speak of it. Some other time I'll tell you all. Now we've work to do—a task that will take all our energies—all our cunning to accomplish it. However is it to be done? *Valga me Dios!*”

To her interrogatory she did not expect reply. And the desponding look of Luisa Valverde showed she had none to give that would be satisfactory; for she quite understood what was the task spoken of, and equally comprehended the difficulty of its accomplishment. Perplexed as the Countess herself, and possibly more despairing, she could but echo the exclamatory words:

“How indeed! *Valga me Dios.*”

For awhile they sat without further exchange of speech, both buried in thought. Not long, however, when the Countess again spoke, saying—

“You’re not good at dissembling, Luisita ; I wish you were.”

“*Santissima !*” exclaimed her friend, alike surprised at the remark as its abruptness. “Why do you wish that, Ysabel ?”

“Because I think I know a way by which something might be done—if you were but the woman to do it.”

“Oh, Ysabelita ! I will do anything to get Florencio out of prison.”

“It isn’t Florencio I want you to get out, but Ruperto. Leave the getting out of Florencio to me.”

Still more astonished was Don Ignacio’s daughter. What could the Countess mean now ? She put the question to her thus—

“What is it you desire me to do ?”

“Practise a little deception—play the coquette—that’s all.”

It was not in Luisa Valverde’s nature.

If she had many admirers, and she had—some of them over head-and-ears in love with her—it was from no frivolity, or encouragement given them, on her part. From the day Florence Kearney first made impression upon her heart, it had been true to him, and she loyal throughout all. So much that people thought her cold, some even pronouncing her a prude. They knew not how warmly that heart beat, though it was but for one. Thinking of this one however, what the Countess proposed gave her a shock, which the latter perceiving, added, with a laugh—

“Only for a time, *amiga mia*. I don’t want you to keep it up till you’ve got a naughty name. Nor to make fools of all the fine gentlemen I see dangling around you. Only one.”

“Which one?”

She was not averse to hearing what the

scheme was, at all events. How could she be, in view of the object aimed at?

“A man,” pursued the Countess, “who can do more for us than your father; more than we’ve been able to do ourselves.”

“Who is he?”

“Don Carlos Santander, colonel of hussars on the staff—aide-de-camp and adjutant to El Excellentissimo in more ways than military ones—some not quite so honourable, ’tis said. Said also, that this staff colonel, for reasons nobody seems to know, or need we care, has more influence at Court than almost anyone else. So what I want you to do is to utilise this influence for our purpose which I know you can.”

“Ah, Ysabelita! How much you are mistaken, to think I would influence him to that! Carlos Santander would be the last man to help me in procuring pardon for Florencio—the very last. You know why.”

"Oh yes ; I know. But he may help *me* in procuring pardon for Ruperto. Luckily my good looks, if I have any, never received notice from the grand colonel, who has eyes only for you ; so he's not jealous of Ruperto. As the obsequious servant of his master, hostile to him no doubt ; but that might be overcome by your doing as I should direct."

"But what would you have me do."

"Show yourself *complaisant* to the Colonel. Only in appearance, as I've said ; and only for a time till you've tried your power over him, and see with what success."

"I'm sure it would fail."

"I don't think it would, *amiga mia* ; and will not, if you go about it according to instructions. Though it may cost you some unpleasantness, Luisita, and an effort, you'll make it for my sake, won't you ? And as a reward," pursued the Countess,

as if to render her appeal more surely effective, "I shall do as much for you, and in a similar way. For I, too, intend counterfeiting complacency in a certain quarter, and in the interest of a different individual—Don Florencio. Now, you understand me?"

"Not quite yet."

"Never mind. I'll make it more plain by-and-bye. Only promise me that you'll do——"

"Dearest Ysabelita! I'd do anything for you."

"And Don Florencio. I thought that would secure your consent. Well, *mil mil gracias!* But what a game of cross-purposes we'll be playing; I for you, and you for me, and neither for ourselves! Let us hope we may both win."

By this the carriage had stopped in front of the Casa Valverde to set down Dona Luisa.

The Countess alighted also, ordering the horses home. It was but a step to her own house, and she could walk it. For she had something more to say which required saying there and then.

Passing on into the *patio*, far enough to be beyond earshot of the "cochero," and there stopping, she resumed the dialogue at the point where she had left off.

"We must set to work at once," she said, "this very day, if opportunity offer. Perhaps in the procession——"

"Oh! Ysabel?" interrupted the other, "how I dislike the thought of this procession—making merry as it were, and he in a prison! And we must pass it too—its very doors! I'm sure I shall feel like springing out of the carriage and rushing inside to see him."

"That would be just the way to ensure your not seeing him—perhaps, never more.

The very opposite is what you must do, or you'll spoil all my plans. But I'll instruct you better before we start out."

"You insist, then, on our going?"

"Of course, yes; for the very reason—the very purpose we've been speaking of. That's just why I ask you to take me with you. It will never do to offend his High Mightiness, angry as we may be with him. I'm now sorry at having shown temper; but how could I help it, hearing Ruperto called a robber? However, that may be all for the best. So, upstairs; turn out your *guarda-roba*, and your jewel case; array yourself in your richest apparel, and be in readiness for the gilded coach when it comes round. *Carramba!*" she added after drawing out her jewelled watch,—one of Losada's best—and glancing at its dial, "we haven't a moment to spare, I must be off to my toilet too."

She had made a step in the direction of the street, when suddenly turning again she added :

“ As a last word, lest I might forget it. When next you appear in the Grand Presence drop that forlorn doleful look. Misery is the weakest weapon either man or woman can make use of—the very worst advocate in any cause. So don't show it, especially in the company of Don Carlos Santander, where in all likelihood you will be before the end of another hour. Try to look cheerful, put on your sweetest smile, though it be a feigned one ; as I intend doing for Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.”

She took her departure now ; but as she passed out through the *saguan* a cloud could be seen upon her countenance, more than that from the shadow of the arched gateway, telling that she herself needed quite

as much as her friend, admonition to be cheerful.





CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE SEWERS.



LONG with a score of other prisoners, the "chain gang" of the Acordada, Kearney, Rock, Rivas, and the dwarf were conducted out into the street, and on the Callé de Plateros. Dominguez, the gaoler, went with them—having received orders to that effect—carrying a heavy *cuarta* with hard rawhide lash knotted at the end. Their escort consisted of two or three files

of the prison guard, dirty looking soldiers of the *infanteria*, in coarse linen uniforms, stiff shakoes on their heads, their arm the old-fashioned flint lock musket.

The scavengers had still their ankle chains on, coupled two and two; these lengthened, however, to give more freedom for their work. One reason for keeping them chained is to economise the strength of the guard; a single sentry thus being as good as a dozen. Of course, it is an additional precaution against escape, a thing which might seem impossible under the muzzles of muskets and bayonets fixed. But to desperadoes such as are some of the Acordada gaol birds it would not be so if left leg free. More than once had the attempt been made, and with success. For in no city is it easier, or indeed so easy. In the Mexican metropolis there are whole districts where the policeman fears to show

his face, and a criminal pursued, even by soldiers in uniform, would have every door thrown open to him, and every opportunity given for stowing himself away. Get he but out into the country, and up to the mountains—on all sides conveniently near—his chances are even better since the first man there met may be either footpad or *salteador*.

As said, the street to which the scavengers were taken was the *Callé de Plateros*, where it ends at the *Alameda Gate*. The covering flags of the *zancas* had been already lifted off, exposing to view the drain brimful of liquid filth; the tools were beside—scoops, drags, and shovels having been sent on before.

Soon on arriving on its edge, Dominguez, who kept close by the two couples in which were the *Tejanos*, ordered them to “lay hold and fall to”.

There could be no question of refusal or disobedience. From the way he twirled the quirt between his fingers it looked as though he wished there was, so that he might have an excuse for using it. Besides, any hanging back would be rewarded by a blow from the butt of a musket, and, persisted in, possibly a bayonet thrust—like as not to lame the refractory individual for life.

There was no need for such violent measures now. The others of the gang had done scavenger work before; and knowing its ways, went at it as soon as the word was given. *Nolens volens* Kearney and Cris Rock, with their chain partners, had to do likewise; though, perhaps, never man laid hold of labourer's tool with more reluctance than did the Texan. It was a long shafted shovel that had been assigned to him, and the first use he made of the implement was

a danger real and present before his eyes at that moment, in the person of a man riding by the side of the carriage in which she sat—Carlos Santander. He it was, in a gold laced uniform, with a smile of proud satisfaction on his face. What a contrast to the craven, crestfallen wretch who, under a coating of dull green ooze, crawled out of the ditch at Pontchartrain! And a still greater contrast in the circumstances of the two men—fortunes, positions, apparel, everything reversed.

The hussar colonel appeared not to be one of the regular escorts attending upon the Dictator; but detached, and free to chose his place in the procession. Well had he chosen it, any one would say; for there was a second lady in the carriage, young and beautiful, too; as may be guessed—the Condesa Almonté. But he seemed to have

no eyes for her, nor words ; his looks and speech all bestowed upon Luisa Valverde. For he was smilingly conversing with her, and she appeared to listen attentively, returning his smiles !

A spectacle to Kearney not only saddening, but maddening. Through his soul, dark as winter now, swept dire bitter misgivings.

“ Are they married ? No. ’Tis not the behaviour of man and wife. Soon will he—engaged no doubt. Yes ; he has won her heart after all ; likely had it then, when I believed it mine. Such deception ? O, God ! ”

These unspoken questions and conjectures passed through his mind rapidly as thought itself.

They were interrupted by his seeing the ladies—the carriage being now nearly abreast—turn their faces towards him in an odd interrogative way. The movement, abrupt

and sudden, seemed prompted ; and so had it been by him on horseback. Florence Kearney saw him nod in that direction, his lips moving, but the distance was too great to hear what he said.

“ *Mira ! Los Tejanos !* ” were Santander’s words, indicating the group of which they formed part. “ One of them is, if I mistake not, an old acquaintance of yours, Don Luisa ? And how strange ! ” he added, feigning surprise. “ Chained to a criminal—no, let me not call him that—an individual in whom the Condesa Almonté takes an interest, if rumour’s to be believed. Is it so, Condesa ? ”

Neither of them made response, for neither was now listening to him. Each had her eyes upon that which engrossed all her attention, one fixedly gazing at Florence Kearney, the other at Ruperto Rivas. For by the grace, or rather negligence, of their

guards, the latter was now up on the pavement.

What an interchange of glances between the pairs thus brought face to face ! What a variety of expression upon their features ! For varied and strong were their emotions at this moment—surprise, sadness, sympathy, indignation, and amidst all, conspicuous above all, looks of unchanged ever-confiding love !

He who had brought about this odd interview—for it had been pre-arranged—was riding on the left and near side of the carriage, the sewer being on the right and off ; which, of course placed him behind the backs of the ladies, as they now were, and hindered his observing their faces. Could he have seen them just then, he might have doubted the success of his scheme, and certainly could not have accounted it a triumph. For the eyes, late turned smilingly upon himself, were now

regarding Florence Kearney with earnest sympathetic gaze.

And the man, to whom this was given, was trying his best to interpret it. He saw that she turned pale as her eyes first fell upon him. That might be but surprise seeing him there, with the consciousness of her own guilt. Or was it pity? If so, he would have spurned it. All the tortures the Acordada could inflict upon him; all the toil and degradation would be easier to bear than that. But no: It could not be pity alone. The sudden start and paling cheek; the look of interest in those eyes, beautiful as ever, and so well remembered; a flash in them that recalled the old time when he believed her heart his; all spoke of something more than mere sympathy with his misfortune. Before the carriage moving slowly on, had carried her out of his sight the jealous fancies so late harrowing his

soul, seemed to be passing away, as though an angel was whispering in his ear: "She loves you—still loves you!"

Needless to say, he was too much occupied in reading the expression on Luisa Valverde's face to give even a look to the other beautiful one beside it. And alike was he forgetful of the man who stood beside himself. Yet between these two neglected individuals glances were being exchanged also in earnest and watchful glances which told of their being as much interested in one another as he in Luisa Valverde, or she in him. Better comprehending one another, too, as a physiognomist could have told observing the play of their features. The first expression on those of the Condesa was surprise, quick changing to indignation, this as suddenly disappearing or becoming subdued, restrained by a thought or possibly a sign given by her "dear, noble

Ruperto". As evinced by the fond, yet proud, sparkle of her eyes, he was no less dear now, no less noble in that degrading garb, than when she knew him in a gold-laced uniform, splendid as that worn by Santander, and he in her eyes ten times more worthy of wearing it. If he had turned bandit, she did not believe it ; though, believing it, she would have loved him all the same. Nor in this would she have so much differed from the rest of her sex. Blameable as it may be—love—even that of a lady—has but little to do with the moralities ; and of a Mexican lady perhaps less than any other. Certain, that Ruperto Rivas, robber or no, in that crossing of glances with the Condesa Almonté, showed no sign of jealousy ; instead full confidence of being beloved by her.

Though the account of this little episode seem long, the actual occurrence—gestures,

thoughts, looks, changes of facial expression—was all comprised within a few seconds of time scarce so much as a minute.

Then the carriage containing the two ladies passed on out of sight, other carriages following with other ladies in them ; more cavalry—Lancers, Hussars, and heavy Dragoons—more music, mingling with the shouts and cheers of the fickle populace, as they swarmed along the foot walk, every now and then vociferating !


“ *Viva, Santa Anna el Illustrissimo ! Viva, el Salvador de la Patria !* ”





CHAPTER XXV.

A MYSTERIOUS MISSIVE.

“YSABEL! To think of it! In the chain-gang—in the sewers! *Madre de Dios!*”

Thus passionately exclaimed Luisa Valverde, half addressing herself to the Condesa Almonté, in her father's house again, to which they had just returned from the ceremony of the procession. They were in the *sala*, seated upon the chair, into which they flung themselves as if overcome with fatigue.

And weariness it was, but not of the body. Their souls were awearied through being unable to give utterance to the thoughts and passions that for hours had been convulsing them. Ever since passing the chain-gang they had been forced to keep up faces, seem as they felt not, smile when they could have wept. This the Condesa had counselled for reasons already hinted at ; and now back home, with no one to see or hear, they were giving way to the wild tumult of emotion so long pent up.

For a time the Condesa made no rejoinder, herself as much affected as her friend. Both sat in despairing attitudes, heads drooped, and hands clasping them as though they ached ; bosoms rising and falling in laboured undulation, the hearts within them painfully pulsing. All so unlike themselves, in such discordance with their great beauty, and the

rich robes they wore. Looking at two such women, one could ill believe it possible for them to be otherwise than happy ; yet at that moment both were miserable as miserable itself.

“ Ah, yes ! ” sighed the Countess, at length, and like as if awakening from some weird dream, its impress still upon her face. “ To think of it ; and fearful it is to think of. I understand things better now. My Ruperto is indeed in danger—more than I this morning believed. And your Florencio too. I could read *his* death in the eyes of Don Carlos Santander ; and one told me the Tejanos are all to be shot ! ”

“ O, Ysabel ! say not that ; if they kill him, they may kill me ! The man I love ! Santa Guadalupe—Blessed Virgin ! Save, oh, save him from such a fate ! ”

Against the wall was a picture of this, the

patroness Saint of Mexico—for there is one in every Mexican house—and, while speaking, the young girl had risen from her chair, glided across the room, and fallen upon her knees before it. In this attitude she remained for some moments, her hands crossed over her breast, her lips moving as though she muttered a prayer.

Altogether differently acted the Condesa. She was not of the devotional sort, where it seemed unlikely to be of practical service. Good Catholic enough, and observant of all the ceremonies, but no believer in miracles ; and, therefore, distrustful of aught Santa Guadalupe, or any other saint, could do for them. She had more belief in the Cromwellian doctrine of keeping the powder dry ; and that she meant to practise it, not with powder, but with her purse, was soon made evident by her speech.

“It’s no use kneeling there,” she said, starting to her feet, and again showing spirit. “Let us pray in our hearts. I’ve been doing that already, and I’m sure so have you. Something else should be done now—another effort made—this time with money; no matter how much it takes. Yes, Luisa, we must act.”

“I want to act,” rejoined the other, as she forsook the kneeling posture, with an abruptness not common to devotees. “Only tell me how. Can you?”

For some seconds the Condesa let the question remain unanswered. Once more her hand had gone up to her head, the jewelled fingers met and clasped upon her brow—this time to quicken reflection. Some scheme already half conceived, needing further elaboration.

Whatever the plan, it was soon worked

out complete, as evinced by her words following.

“*Amiga mia*; is there in your service one we can implicitly trust?”

“José. You know we can trust him.”

“True. But he won’t do for the first step to be taken: which is, indeed, only to deliver a letter. But it needs being adroitly done, and a woman will be the better for that. Besides, José will be wanted for something else, at the same time. There are two or three of my own female following could be relied on, so far as fidelity is concerned. But, unluckily, they’re all known on the *Callé de Plateros*, as well as the street itself. And there isn’t any of them particularly intelligent, or dexterous. What we stand in need of now is one possessed of both these qualities—either woman or girl.”

“Would Pepita do?”

to swing it round his head, as though he intended bringing it down on that of one of the sentries who stood beside.

“Durnashun !” he shrieked out, still brandishing the tool and looking the soldier straight in the face. “If’t warnt that the thing ’ud be o’ no use, an’ *you* aint the one as is to blame, I’d brain ye on the spot, ye ugly yallerbelly. Wage ! Let me get back to Texas, and grip o’ a good rifle, the Mexikin as kums my way may look out for particler forked lightnin !”

Though not comprehending a word of what was said, the little manikin of a *militario* was so frightened by the big fellow’s gestures as to spring back several feet, with a look of alarm so intense, yet so comical, as to set the Texan off into a roar of laughter. And still laughing he faced towards the sewer, plunged in his implement and set to work with the others.

At first the task was comparatively clean and easy—a sort of skimming affair—the scavengers keeping upon the pavement. The necessity had not yet arisen for them going down into the drain.

After a time, however, as the liquid got lower and the sediment at the bottom too stiff to be conveniently scooped up, a number of them were ordered to “step in”. It was a cruel, brutal order, and Bill Sykes would have declined sending his “bull-dawg” into that sewer after rats. But Dominguez, a sort of Mexican Bill Sykes, had no scruples about this with the unfortunates he had charge of, and with a “*carajo*” and a threatening flourish of his whip, he repeated the order. One or two of the *forzados* took the plunge good humouredly, even to laughing, as they dropped into the stuff, waist deep, sending the mud in splashes all round. The dainty ones went in

more leisurely, some of them needing a little persuasion at the point of the bayonet.

Cris Rock was already down, having gone voluntarily. Only one of each couple had been ordered below ; and, much as he disliked the dwarf, he had no wish to see him drowned or suffocated, which the diminutive creature would well nigh have been in the horrible cesspool. Tall as the Texan was, the stuff reached up to his thighs, the surface of the street itself being on a level with his arm-pits : while only the heads of the others could be seen above the stones.

Neither Kearney nor Rivas had yet taken the plunge. They still stood on the brink, discussing the question of precedence. Not that either wished the other to do the disagreeable ; instead, the reverse. Strange as it may appear, knowing or believing him to be a bandit, the young Irishman had taken a liking

to the Mexican, and the feeling was reciprocated so that each was now trying to restrain the other from entering the ugly gulf.

But their friendly contest was cut short by the brutal gaoler ; who advancing grasped Rivas by the shoulder, and with his other hand pointing downward shouted, “ *Abajo !* ”

There was no help for it but obey ; the alternative sure of being something worse. For the man so rudely commanded went down willingly ; indeed, with alacrity, to satisfy his impulse of friendship for the Irlandes.

Had Carlos Santander been there likely the position would have been reversed, and Kearney compelled to “ take the ditch ”. But the Governor of the Acordada had control of details, and to his hostility and spleen, late stirred by that wordy encounter with Rivas, the latter was no doubt indebted for

the partiality shown him by Don Pedro's head turnkey.

In time, all were disposed of ; one of each couple down in the sewer, pitching out its sweet contents ; the other pressing them back upon the pavement to prevent their oozing in again. Either way the work was now nasty enough ; but for those below, it was a task too repulsive to set even the lowest pariah at.





CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PROCESSION.



DISAGREEABLE as was their job, some of the *forzados* made light of it, bandying jests with the street passengers who did not find it safe to go too near them. A scoopful of the inky liquid could be flung so as to spoil the polish on boots, or sent its splashes over apparel still higher. Even the vigilance of the sentries could not prevent this, or rather they cared

not to exercise it. The victims of such practical jokes were usually either of the class *pelado*, or the yet more humble aboriginals accustomed to be put upon by the soldiers themselves, who rather relished the fun.

But only the more abandoned of the gaol-birds behaved in this way, many of them seeming to feel the degradation more than aught else. For among them, as we know, were men who should not have been there. Some may have seen friends passing by, who gave them looks of sympathy or pity, and possibly more than one knew himself under eyes whose expression told of a feeling stronger than either of these—love itself. Indeed this last, or something akin to it, seemed the rule rather than the exception. In Mexico, he must be a deeply disgraced criminal whose sweetheart

would be ashamed of him ; and every now and then, a brown skinned "muchacha" might be seen crossing to where the scavengers were at work, and with a muttered word or two, passing something into a hand eagerly outstretched to receive it. The sentries permitted this, after examining the commodity so tendered, and seeing it a safe thing to be entrusted to the receiver. These gifts of friendship, or *gages d'amour*, were usually eatables from the nearest cook-shop ; their donors well knowing that the fare of the Acordada was neither plentiful nor sumptuous.

But beyond these interested ones, few of the pedestrians stopped or even looked at the chain-gang. To most, if not all, it was an ordinary spectacle, and attracted no more attention than would a crossing sweeper on a London street. Not as

much as are the latter, as he is often an Oriental. On that particular day, however, the party of scavengers presented a novelty, in having the two Tejanos in it; with a yet greater one in the odd juxtaposition of Cris Rock, and his diminutive "mate". In Mexico, a man over six feet in height is a rarity, and as Cris exceeded this by six inches, a rarer sight still was he. The colossus coupled to the dwarf, as Gulliver to Liliputian—a crooked Liliputian as that—no wonder that a knot of curious gazers collected around them, many as they approached the grotesque spectacle uttering ejaculations of surprise.

"*Ay Dios!*" exclaimed one. *Gigante y enano!*" (a giant and a dwarf)—"and chained together! Who ever saw the like?"

Such remarks were continually passing among the spectators who laughed as they listened to them. And though the Texan could not tell what they said, their laughter "riled" him. He supposed it a slur upon his extraordinary stature, of which he was himself no little proud, while they seemed to regard it sarcastically. Could they have had translated to them the rejoinders that now and then came from his lips, like the rumbling of thunder, they would have felt their sarcasm fully paid back, with some change over. As a specimen :—

"Devil darn ye, for a set of yaller-jawed pigmies ! Ef I hed about a millyun o' ye out in the open purairu, I'd gie you somethin' to larf at. Dod-rot me ! ef I don't b'lieve a pack o' coycoats ked chase as many o' ye as they'd count themselves ;

ond arter runnin' ye down 'ud scorn to put tooth into yur stinkin' carcasses !”

Fortunately for him, the “yaller-jawed pigmies” understood not a word of all this ; else, notwithstanding his superior size and strength he might have had rough handling from them. Without that, he was badly plagued by their behaviour, as a bull fretted with flies ; which may have had something to do with his readiness to go down into the drain. There, up to his elbows, he was less conspicuous, and so less an object of curiosity.

* * * * *

It had got to be noon, with the sun at fire heat ; but for all the *forzados* were kept on at work. No rest for them until the task should be completed, and they taken back to their prison quarters at a late hour of the afternoon. The cruel gaoler told them so in a jeering way. He seemed to take a

pleasure in making things disagreeable to them, as he strutted to and fro along their line, flourishing his quirt, and giving grand exhibition of his "brief authority".

A little after midday, however, there came a change in their favour, brought by-unlooked-for circumstances. Groups of people began to gather in the *Callé de Plateros* swarming into it from side streets, and taking stand upon the footwalk. Soon they lined it all along as far as the eye could reach. Not *pelados*, but most of them belonging to a class respectable, attired in their holiday clothes, as on a *dia de fiesta*. Something of this it was as the scavengers were presently told, though some of them may have had word of it before without feeling any concern about it. Two, however, whom it did concern—though little dreamt they of its doing so—were only made aware of what

the crowd was collecting for, when it began to thicken. These were Kearney and Rivas, who knowing the language of the country, could make out from what was being said around them, that there was to be a *funcion*. The foundation-stone of a new church was to be laid in the suburb of San Cormé, the chief magistrate of the State himself to lay it—with all ceremony and a silver trowel. The procession, formed in the Piazza Grande, would, of course, pass through the Callé de Plateros, hence the throng of the people in that street.

Funcions and *fiestas* are of such frequent occurrence in the Mexican metropolis—as indeed everywhere else in that land of the *far niente*—that this, an ordinary one, and not much announced, excited no particular interest, save in the suburb of San Cormé itself—a quarter where a church might be

much needed—being a very den of disreputables. Still a large number of people had put on their best apparel, and sallied forth to witness the procession.

This did not delay long in showing itself. It came heralded by the stirring notes of a trumpet, then the booming of the big drum in a band of music—military. A troop of cavalry—Lancers—formed the advance, to clear the way for what was to follow; this being a couple of carriages, in which were seated the Bishop of Mexico and his ecclesiastical staff, all in grand gaudy raiments; on such an occasion the Church having precedence, and the post of honour.

Behind came the gilded coach of the Dictator—flanked on each side by guards in gorgeous uniform—himself in it. Not alone, but with one seated by his side, whose presence there caused Florence Kearney surprise,

great as he ever experienced in his life. Despite the coat of diplomatic cut and its glittering insignia, he easily recognised his *ci-devant* teacher of the Spanish tongue—Don Ignacio Valverde!

But great as was his astonishment he was left no time to indulge in it, or speculate how his old “crammer” came to be there. For close behind the Dictator’s carriage, followed another, holding one who had yet more interest for him than Don Ignacio—Don Ignacio’s daughter!





CHAPTER XXIV.

SIGNIFICANT GLANCES.



ES ; the lady in the carriage was Luisa Valverde. Too surely she, thought Florence Kearney ; for seeing her there was painful to him—a shock—as one who sees the woman he loves in in the jaws of some great danger. And so he believed her to be, as a host of unpleasant memories came crowding into his mind like hideous spectres. No imagination either, but

“You mean the little *mestiza* who was with you at New Orleans?”

“The same. She’s all that; and besides, devoted to me.”

Don Ignacio’s daughter had reason to know this, from experience in the Casa de Calvo, in which Pepita had played a part.

“She’ll do,” said the Countess; “the very individual, from what I’ve seen of her. Get me pen, ink, and paper—quick! At the same time summon Pepita!”

The Countess was now all action; and, responding to her roused energies, the other rushed towards the bell-pull, and gave it two or three vigorous jerks.

As it chanced there were writing materials in the room; and, while waiting for the bell to be answered, the Countess made use of them; hastily scribbling some words on a sheet of paper, which she folded without

putting into an envelope. Instead, twisted it between her finger, as if dissatisfied with what she had written, and designed cancelling it. Far from this her intention, as was soon made manifest.

“*Muchacha!*” she said to Pepita, who, being lady’s maid, had answered the bell herself. “Your mistress tells me you can be trusted on a matter which calls not only for confidence, but cleverness. Is that so?”

“I can’t promise the cleverness, your ladyship; but for the other, I think the Dona Luisa knows she can rely on me.”

“You’d be good at delivering a letter, without letting all the world into the secret, I suppose?”

“I’ll do my best, your ladyship, if Duena command it.”

“Yes, I wish it, Pepita,” interposed Dona Luisa, herself the “Duena”.

“*Muy bien Senorita.* Into whose hands is it to be put?”

Though speaking direct to her own mistress, the interrogatory was more meant for the Condesa, between whose fingers and thumb she saw the thing she was to take charge of.

The answer to her query called for some consideration. The note was for Ruperto Rivas; but the girl knew him not; so how could she give it him?

Here was a difficulty not before thought of, for a time perplexing both the ladies. In this case Dona Luisa was the first to see a way out of it, saying in a whisper:—

“Let her give it to Florencio; she knows *him*, and he can——”

“*Carramba!*” exclaimed the Countess interrupting. “How wonderfully wise you are, *amiga!* The very thing! And it never occurred to me! Now, *you* tell her what to do.”

"This, Pepita," said her mistress, taking the crumpled sheet from the Condesa, and passing it to her maid, "this is to be delivered to a gentleman you've seen, and should know."

"Where have I seen him, senorita?"

"In New Orleans."

"Do you mean Don Carlos, my lady?"

"No;" the abrupt negative accompanied with a dissatisfied look.

"Who then, senorita?"

"Don Florencio."

"*Ay Dios!* Is he here? I did not know it. But where am I to find him?"

No need to repeat the dialogue as continued. Suffice it that, before leaving the room, Pepita received full instructions where to find Don Florencio, and when found what she was to do and say to him.

So far all this was easy enough. More

difficult the commission to be entrusted to José—more dangerous, too. But it was made known to him in less than twenty minutes after; receiving his ready assent to its execution—though it should cost him his life, as he said. One motive for his agreeing to undergo the danger was devotion to his young mistress; another to stand well with Pepita, who had a power over him, and as he knew had entered upon her part with an ardent alacrity. But there was a third stimulus to keep up his courage, should it feel like failing—this having to do with the Condesa. Drawing out her grand gold watch—good value for a hundred *dollos*, and holding it up before his eyes, she said:

“That’s your reward, José; that or its worth in money.”

No need saying more. For the commission he was to execute much preparation was


to be made, in all haste too. And in all haste he set to making it—determined to win the watch.





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PLAY OF EYES.

HE ceremony of laying the foundation-stone had been brief, and it was yet only an early hour of the afternoon when the procession passed back along the Callè de Plateros. The scavengers were still at work, and it is scarcely necessary to say that two of their number were earnestly on the look-out for a certain carriage. Sorry plight as they were in, neither

felt ashamed or reluctant to come again under those eyes, after the expression they had observed in them. Rivas had hopes that in another exchange of glances with the Condesa, he might see something still further to instruct him; while Kearney not so confident about his interpretation of those given to himself, longed to have a second reading of them.

Nor was he disappointed. The procession returned sooner than they expected, the looked-for carriage still holding its place in the line; the ladies in it, but now no officer of hussars, nor any other, riding alongside. Santander, an aide-de-camp as known, had likely been ordered off on some official errand, and likely too, his chief did not relish seeing him so near that particular equipage. Whatever the cause, his absence gave gratification to the two men noting it. With less con-

strait glances might now be exchanged—even gestures.

And both were. The look Kearney had given to him was accompanied by a nod of recognition; slight and timid, for it could not well be otherwise under the circumstances. But the eyes spoke more eloquently, telling him of respect undiminished, faith that had never faltered, love strong and true as ever. If he read pity in them too, it was not such as he would now spurn.

To Rivas were accorded signs of a very different sort. He had them not only from eyes, but the movement of a fan and fingers. They seemed satisfactory to him; for as the carriage passed out of sight, he turned to the other and said in a cheerful whisper:

“Keep up heart, *camarado*! I perceive you're not 'unknown to a friend of my

friend. You heard the brute of a gaol-governor taunt me about a certain Condesa ? ”

“ I did.”

“ Well ; that’s the lady, alongside her who’s just been making eyes at you. An old acquaintance of yours, I see ; and I think could say where it was commenced. Never mind about that now. Enough for you to know, that if friendship can get us out of this fix, with gold to back it, we may yet have a chance of giving leg-bail to the turnkeys of the Acordada.”

Their dialogue was terminated by Dominguez, who, temporarily absent for a swill at one of the neighbouring *pulquerias*, now returned to the superintendence of his charge, and roughly commanded them to resume their work.

* * * * *

For nearly another hour the work went

on, though not so regularly as before. The stream of returning sightseers still lined the footwalks, many of them showing by their behaviour they had been paying a visit to *pulquerias* too, and more than once. Some stopped to fraternise with the soldiers, and would have done likewise with the *forzados*, if permitted. They were not hindered, however, from holding converse with the former, and extending hospitality to them in the shape of treats; sentry after sentry stealing away from his post after the proffered, and coveted toothful. Nor was Dominguez an exception, he too every now and then repeating his visit to the dram-shop.

All this gave the scavengers licence of speech, with some liberty of action, or rather rest from their disagreeable task. And in the interval, while they were thus

idling, the young Irishman noticed that the eyes of his chain companion were kept continuously on the footwalks, now on one side now the other, his face towards the Plaza Grande—as though he expected to see some one coming that way. Kearney himself was regarding the people who came along—but only from curiosity—when his attention was more particularly drawn to one, who had come to a stop on the sidewalk nearly opposite. This was a girl of rather diminutive stature, dressed in the ordinary fashion of the common people, short-skirted petticoat, sleeveless *camisa*, arms, ankles, and feet bare; but the head, breast, and shoulders all under one covering—the *reboso*. Even her face was hidden by this, for she was wearing it “tapado,” one eye only visible, through a little loop in the folded scarf, which

was kept open by the hand that held it. The girl had drawn up in front of a jeweller's window, as though to feast that eye on the pretty things therein displayed. And thus Kearney would not have noticed her, any more than the others, many of them in like garb passing to and fro. But, just as his eye happened to light upon her, he saw that hers—literally a single one—was fixed upon him, regarding him in a way altogether different from that which might be expected on the part of a chance stranger. Her attitude, too, was odd. Though facing nearly square to the shop window, and pretending to look into it, her head was slightly turned, and the eye surely on him.

At first he was puzzled to make out what it could mean, and why the girl should be taking such an interest in him.

Possibly, had she been wearing shoes and stockings, he might have come easier to the comprehension of it. But a little brown-skinned, barefooted *muchacha*, in a petticoat of common stuff, and cheap scarf over her shoulders, he could think of no reason why she should have ought to do with him.

Only for a few seconds, however, was he thus in the dark. Then all became clear, the *éclaircissement* giving him a start, and sending the blood in quick rush through his veins—pleasant withal. For the girl seeing she had caught his attention, relaxed her clasp upon the scarf, partially exposing her face, and the other eye.

Kearney needed not seeing the whole of it for recognition now. Well remembered he those features—pretty in spite of the

dark skin—he had often seen wreathed with pleasant smiles, as their owner used to open the door for him in the Casa de Calvo.





CHAPTER XXVII.

A LETTER DEXTEROUSLY DELIVERED.



REPITA it was, though in a different style of dress to what he had been accustomed to see her in ; as at New Orleans she had not kept to her national costume. Besides, there was a *soupcon* of shabbiness about her present attire, and then the shoeless feet !

“Dismissed the Valverde service—out of a situation—poor girl !”

He would not have so pityingly reflected, had he seen her as she was but a short half-hour before, in a pretty muslin dress, snow-white stockings, and blue satin slippers. Since then she had made a change in her toilet under direction and by help of the Condesa, who had attired her in a way more befitting the task intended.

Kearney in full belief of her being a discharged servant remembering her many little kindnesses to himself in the Casa de Calvo, was about to call her up, and speak a word of sympathy for old time's sake. Dominguez was still absent, and the nearest sentry engaged in a chaffing encounter with some one in the crowd.

Just then he observed a slight tremour of her head, and with a sudden movement of the hand which seemed to say, "No, don't speak to me". She too could talk that

mute language, so well understood in her country.

So restrained, he kept silent ; to see her now glance furtively around, as if to make sure no one else was observing her. She had again closed the scarf over her face, but in the hand that held it under her chin something white—a piece of paper he supposed—appeared ; just for one instant, then drawn under. Another significant look accompanied this gesture, saying plain as word could speak it.

“ You see what I’ve got for you ; leave the action all to me.”

He did, for he could not do otherwise ; he was fixed to this spot, she foot free. And the use she now made of this freedom was to walk straight out into the street, though not as coming to him ; instead, her steps, as her eyes, were directed towards Cris Rock

and the hunchback, who were at work some paces further on. She seemed bent on making closer inspection of the odd pair, nor would any one suppose she had other object in crossing over to them.

No one did, save Kearney himself. Rivas had been again ordered into the sewer, and was at work in it. Besides, he did not know Pepita, though he was the one she most wished to be near. Chiefly for him was the communication she had to make.

It could not be, however, without a demonstration likely to be observed, therefore dangerous. But her wit was equal to occasion, proving how well the ladies had chosen their letter-carrier.

"*Ay Dios!*" she exclaimed aloud, brushing past the young Irishman, and stopping with her eyes bent wonderingly on the strangely-contrasted couple; then aside in

sotto voce to Kearney, whom she had managed to place close behind her, apparently unconscious of his being there—"A *billetita*, Don Florencio—not for you—for the Señor Rivas—you can give it him—I daren't. Try to take it out of my hand without being seen." Then once more aloud. "*Gigante y enano !*" just as others had said, "*Rue cosa estranja !*" (what a strange thing).

She need not say any more, nor stay there any longer. For while she was speaking the crumpled sheet had passed through the fringe of the scarf, out of her fingers into those of Don Florencio, who had bent him to his work, bringing his hand to the right place for the transfer.

Her errand, thus vicariously accomplished with another wondering look at the giant and dwarf, and another "*Ay Dios !*" she turned to go back to the side-walk. But before passing

Kearney she managed to say something more to him.

“Carriage will come along soon—two ladies in it—one you know—one dear to you, as you to her.”

Sweet words to him, though muttered, and he thanked her who spoke them—in his heart. He dared not speak his thanks, even in whisper; she was already too far off, tripping back to the flagged footwalk; along which she turned, soon to disappear from his sight.

What she had said about the coming of a carriage was to Kearney not altogether intelligible. But, no doubt, the note, now concealed inside his shirt bosom, would clear that up; and the next step was to hand it over to him for whom it was intended.

Luckily, Rivas had not been unobservant of what was going on between the girl and his companion. Her look seeming strange to him,

had attracted his attention, and though keeping steadily at work, his eyes were not on it, but on them, which resulted in his witnessing the latter part of the little episode, and having more than a suspicion it also concerned himself. He was not taken by surprise, therefore, when Kearney drawing closer to the edge of the drain, spoke down to him in a half-whisper—

“I’ve got something for you. Bring the point of your tool against mine, and look out when you feel my fingers.”

“*Muy bien!* I understand,” was the muttered response. In a second or two after the shafts of their implements came into collision accidentally, it appeared. He would have been indeed sharp-witted who could have supposed it intentional, and lynx-eyed to have seen that scrap of twisted paper passed from one to the other—the second transfer dexter-

ously done as the first. All any one could have told was, that the two scavengers seemed sorry for what had occurred, made mutual apologies, then separated to the full length of their coupling chain, and went to work again, looking meek and innocent as lambs.

It was now Rivas' turn to prove himself possessed of quick wit. He had reason to think the letter required immediate reading; and how was this to be done? To be seen at it would surely bring the sentries upon him, even though Dominguez was not there. And for them to get possession of it—that was a calamity perhaps worst of all! Possibly to compromise the writer; and well knew he who that was.

For a time he was perplexed, looking in all directions, and thinking of every way possible for him to read the letter unobserved. But none did seem possible. He could stoop

down, so as to be unseen by those passing along the sidewalk ; but close to the sewer's edge were two or three of the sentries, who would still command view of him.

All at once a look of satisfaction came over his countenance, as his eyes rested on a side drain, which entered the main one, like many others, from the adjacent dwellings. He had just scraped the mud out of its mouth, and was close to it.

The very thing, was his thought—the very place for his purpose. And shortly after he might have been seen standing before it, in bent attitude, his arms busy with his shovel, but his eyes and thoughts busier with a sheet of paper which lay at the bottom of the branch drain, some two or three feet inside it. It was the *billetita* and though the creases were but hastily pressed out, he contrived to make himself master of its contents. They were

but brief and legibly written—the script famillar to him.

“QUERIDO,—Soon after receiving this—say, half-an-hour—look for a carriage—landau shut up—two ladies inside—pair of large horses—*frisones*—grey. When opposite, be ready—with him who shares your chain. Leave manners in the mud, make a rush, storm the carriage, eject the occupants rudely—violently—and take their places. You can trust the *cochero*. Some danger in the attempt, I know; but more if not made. Your old enemy implacable—determined to have your life. Do this, dearest and save it—for your country’s sake, as also that of

“YSABEL.”





CHAPTER XXVIII.

LOOKING OUT FOR A LANDAU.



FROM the way Rivas treated the “billetita” after he had finished reading it, one unacquainted with its contents might have supposed they had made him either mad angry, or madly jealous. Instead of taking it up tenderly, and treasuring it away, he planted his muddy boot upon it, with a back scrape brought it into the main sewer, still keeping it under the mud and

trampling it with both feet, lifted and set down alternately, the while shovelling away, as though he had forgotten all about it. Not so, however. The tread-mill action was neither accidental nor involuntary, but for a purpose. The writer had committed herself in sursigning a portion of her name, as by other particulars, and should the letter fall into hands he knew of, her danger would be as great as his own.

In a few seconds, however, any uneasiness about this was at an end. The most curious *chiffonier* could not have deciphered a word written on that sheet, which by the churning he had submitted it to must have been reduced to a very pulp.

During all this time no one had taken notice of his proceedings, not even the man chained to him, except by an occasional side glance. For Kearney, well aware of what he

was at, to draw attention from him had got up a wordy demonstration with the dwarf—to all appearance a quarrel. There was real anger on the side of the latter ; for the “ gringo,” as he contemptuously called the Irishman, had cruelly mocked his deformity. A cruelty which gave pain to the mocker himself ; but he could think of no other way to secure inattention to Rivas, and this efficiently did. Both talking the tongue of the country, their war of words, with some grotesque gestures which Kearney affected, engrossed the attention of all within sight or hearing ; so that not an eye was left for the surreptitious reader of the letter.

When the sham quarrel came to an end—which it did soon as he who commenced it saw it should—the knot of spectators it had drawn around dispersed, leaving things as before. But not as before felt Rivas and Kearney.

Very different now the thoughts stirring within them, both trying to appear calm while under the greatest agitation. For they had again contrived to bring their ears together, and the latter now knew all about the contents of the Condesa's letter, their purport being fully explained, nor did they draw apart, till a thorough understanding had been established between them as to the action they should take.

All this without loss of time was translated to Cris Rock, who was told also of their resolve to attempt to escape, in which the Texan was but too glad to take part. Kearney would have stayed there, and gone back into the Acordada, loathsome jail though it was, sooner than leave his old filibustering comrade behind. He could never forget the incident of El Salado, nor cease to feel gratitude to the man who had offered to give up life for him.

But there was no need for Rock being left behind. Rivas himself wished it otherwise, for more than one reason; but one good one, that instead of obstructing their escape he would be an aid to it.

The hunchback alone was not let into their secret. No doubt he too would be glad to get free from his chains, since he was under a sentence of imprisonment for life. But who could tell whether at the last moment he might not purchase pardon by turning out and betraying them? They knew him to be vile enough even for that, and so kept him in the dark about their design.

There was no need for further premeditation or contrivance of plans. That had all been traced out for them in the singular epistle signed "Ysabel" and a few whispered words from one to the other completed the

understanding of it, with what was to be done. From the time this was settled out, never looked three pair of eyes more eagerly along a street, than did theirs along the Calle de Plateros, never was a carriage more anxiously awaited than a landau which should show itself with hood up, drawn by a pair of grey horses.

* * * * *

It is now well on the afternoon, and the "beauty and fashion" of the Mexican metropolis were beginning to appear in carriages, with chivalry on horseback, along the line of streets leading to the Paseo Nuevo. The procession of the morning would little affect the usual evening display; and already several equipages had rolled past the place where the chain-gang was at work. But as yet appeared not the one so anxiously looked for, and the half-hour was up!

Still ten minutes more without any sign of it !

More anxious now were the three prisoners, who contemplated escape, though not at all to the same degree, or for the same reason. Kearney feared there had been a failure, from betrayal by the coachman spoken of as so trustworthy ; he did not think of suspecting Pepita. The Texan, too, believed some hitch had occurred, a "bit o' crooked luck" as he worded it. Not so Rivas. Though, as the others, chafing at the delay, he still had confidence in the carriage coming, as he had in the directing head of one he expected to see inside it. It was being purposely kept back, he fancied ; likely as not, lest it might attract attention by being too early on the street.

Whatever the cause, his conjectures were

soon brought to an end—and abruptly—by seeing the thing itself.

“*Bueno!*” he mentally exclaimed, then muttering to the others—“Yonder it comes! *Frisones pardes* coachman in sky blue and silver—be ready *camarados.*’”

And ready they were, as panthers preparing to spring. Rock and Rivas, as Kearney himself, were now out of the sewer and up on the street; all three still making believe to work; while the dwarf seemed to suspect there was something in the wind, but could not guess what.

He knew the instant after, when a strong hand, grasping him by the collar, lifted him off his feet, raising and tossing him further aloft, as though he had been but a rat.



CHAPTER XXIX.

A CLUMSY COCHERO.



PERHAPS no people in the world have been more accustomed to spectacular surprises than they who perambulate the streets of the Mexican metropolis. For the half-century preceding the time of which I write, they had witnessed almost as many revolutions as years, seen blood spilled till the stones ran red with it, and dead bodies lying before their

doors often for hours, even days, unremoved. As a consequence they are less prone to curiosity than the dwellers in European cities, and the spectacle or incident that will stir their interest in any great degree must needs be of an uncommon kind.

Rare enough was that they were called on to witness now—such of them as chanced to be sauntering along the Calle de Plateros, where the chain-gang was at work. They first saw a carriage—a handsome equipage of the landau speciality—drawn by a pair of showy horses, and driven by a coachman in smart livery, his hat cockaded, proclaiming the owner of the turn-out as belonging to the military or diplomatic service. Only ladies, however, were in it—two of them—and the horses proceeding at a rather leisurely pace. As several other carriages with ladies in them, and liveried coachmen on the boxes,

had passed before, and some seen coming behind, there was nothing about this one to attract particular attention ; unless, indeed, the beauty of the two “senoritas” inside, which was certainly exceptional. Both were young, and, if related, not likely to be sisters ; in contour of features, complexion, colour of eyes and hair, everything different, even to contrast. But alike in that, each after her own style was a picture of feminine loveliness of the most piquantly attractive kind ; while their juxtaposition made it all the more so, for they were seated side by side.

Such could not fail to draw the eyes of the street passengers upon them, and elicit looks of admiration. So far from courting this, however, they seemed desirous of shunning it. The day was one of the finest, the atmosphere deliciously enjoyable, neither too warm nor too cold ; other carriages were

open, yet the hoods of theirs met overhead, and the glasses were up. Still, as these were not curtained they could be seen through them. Some saw who knew them, and saluted; gentlemen by raising the hat, lady acquaintances by a nod, a quivering of the fingers. For it was the hour of promenade to the Alameda. Others to whom they were unknown inquired whose carriage it was. But not a few noticed in the faces of its fair occupants an expression which struck them as singular; something of constraint or anxiety—the last so unlike what should have been there.

And so all along the line of street, until the carriage came nearly opposite the entrance gate of the Alameda, still going slowly; at which the pampered, high-spirited horses seemed to chafe and fret. Just then, however, they showed a determination to change

the pace, or at all events the direction, by making a sudden start and shy to the right; which carried the off wheels nearly nave-deep into the ridge of mud recently thrown out of the sewer.

Instinctively, or mechanically, the coachman pulled up. No one could suppose designedly; since there was sufficient likelihood of his having an overturn. Still, as the mud was soft, by bearing on the near rein, with a sharp cut of the whip, he might easily clear the obstruction.

This was not done; and the spectators wondered why it was not. They had already made up their minds, that the balk was due to the coachman's maladroit driving, and this further proof of his stupidity quite exhausted their patience. Shouts assailed him from all sides, jeers, and angry ejaculations.

“*Burro!*” (donkey) exclaimed one; a second crying out, “What a clumsy *cochero!*” a third, “You’re a nice fellow to be trusted with reins! A rope tied to a pig’s tail would better become you?”

Other like shafts, equally envenomed, were hurled at José’s head; for it scarce needs telling that he was the driver of the carriage, and the ladies inside it his mistress and the Condesa Almonté. For all, he seemed but little to regard what was being said to him—indeed nothing, having enough on hand with his restive horses. But why did he not give them the whip, and let them have more rein! It looked as if that would start them off all right again, and that was what every one was shouting to him to do, he instead doing the very opposite, holding the animals in till they commenced plunging.

The ladies looked sorely affrighted; they

had from the first, for it was all but the occurrence of an instant. Both had risen to their feet, one tugging at the strap to get the sash down, the other working at the handle of the door, which perversely refused to act, all the while uttering cries of alarm.

Several of the passengers rushed to the door in the near side to assist them, that on the off being unapproachable by reason of the open drain. But on this also appeared rescuers—a pair of them—not street promenaders, but two of the chain-gang! All muddy as these were, they were advancing with as much apparent eagerness as the others—more in reality—to release the imperilled *senoritas*. A proof that humanity may exist even in the breast of a jail-bird; and the spectators, pleased with an exhibition of it, so rare and unexpected, were preparing to applaud them enthusiastically.

Their admiration, however, received a rude and almost instantaneous check, changing to wild astonishment, succeeded by equally wild indignation. The *forzados* got their door open first ; but the ladies, apparently terrified at the rough, unclean creatures, refused to go out that way, and only shrank back. Luckily, the other was by this also opened, and they made through it into the street. But not before the two scavengers had leaped up into the carriage beside them, and, as if angry at their earlier offer being declined, given them a rude shove outward !

That was not all the spectators saw to astonish them. Other incidents followed equally unlooked for, and with lightning rapidity. One was indeed of simultaneous occurrence ; a second couple of the scavengers—the *gigante y enano*—rushing towards the coachman's box, clambering up to it,

Rock flinging the dwarf before him, as one would an old carpet-bag, and mounting after. Then, jerking the reins and whip out of Jose's hands—letting him still keep his seat, however,—he loosened the one, and laid the lash of the other on the horses' hips, so sharply and vigorously, as to start them at once into a gallop.

Meanwhile, the uncouth couple inside had pulled to the doors, shutting themselves in, and taken the seats late occupied by the elegantly dressed ladies—a transformation so grotesque as to seem more dream than reality. And so off all went, leaving behind a crowd as much amazed as any that ever witnessed spectacle on the streets of the Mexican metropolis.



CHAPTER XXX.

THE POOR LADIES.



QUITE a combination of circumstances had favoured the escape of the four *forzados*—the balking of the horses, the absence of Dominguez, and the relaxed vigilance of the guards—from their brains bemuddled with drink. But there was yet another lucky chance that stood them in stead—the point from which they had started. The line of

sentries ended at the Alamedas gate, and, as the one posted there was he who had them in particular charge, once past him they had only to fear a single bullet sent after them.

As it turned out they did not even get that, fortune favouring them in every way. This sentry, though last on the line outward, was the first encountered by the people returning from the ceremony at San Cosmé; therefore made most of by passing friends, with the bottle oftener presented to his lips. As a consequence when the carriage whirled past him he had but an indistinct idea of why it was going so fast, and none at all as to who were in it. With eyes drowned in *aguardiente* he stood as one dazed looking after, but taking no measures to stop it. When at length some one bawled the truth into his

ear and he brought his flint-lock to an unsteady level, it would have been too late—had the piece gone off. Luckily for those on the side-walk, it did not; missing fire by a flash in the pan, as might have been anticipated.

Never were sentries more completely taken by surprise than they guarding the chain gang. Nor more disagreeably. They knew they had been neglecting their duty, and might expect severe punishment! possibly set at the very task they were now superintending! Still they made no attempt to pursue. They were not cavalry; and only mounted men could overtake that landau with its curious load, soon to vanish from their sight. So they stood gazing after it in helpless bewilderment, their faces showing a variety of expressions, surprise, anger, fear, mingled in a most ludicrous

manner. Deserting their posts they had gathered into a knot, and it was sometime before they had so far recovered their senses as to think of despatching one of their number to the Plaza Grande after cavalry sure to be there.

It was a fine opportunity for others of the gaol-birds to make a bolt; but for the obstructive coupling-chains no doubt some would have availed themselves of it. These, however, hindered the attempt. There were no more restive horses, nor blundering coachmen to bring another carriage near enough for a rush.

But the most interesting group now on the ground was that which had collected around the ladies left carriageless; some offering services, others speaking words of sympathy. "*Las señoritas pobres!*" *Pobrecitas!*"—"The poor young ladies!" "Poor

things !”) were exclamations uttered over and over again.

It was a trying situation for the “poor things” to be in sure enough. But they acquitted themselves admirably ; especially the Condesa, who, young though she was, for courage and coolness had few to equal her. In that emergency no man could have shown himself her superior. Her look of still untranquillised terror, the intermittent flashes of anger in her eyes as she loudly denounced the ruffians who had carried off their carriage, was a piece of acting worthy of a Rachel or Siddons. He would have been a keen physiognomist who could have told that her emotions were counterfeit. Little dreamt the sympathising spectators that while being pushed out of the carriage she had contrived to whisper back to the man so rudely behaving ; “ Look under the cushions,

querido ! You'll find something. *Dios te guarda* !

Still less could they have supposed that the other young lady, looking so meek, had at the same time spoken tender words to the second ruffian who had assailed them.

The part the *pobrecitas* were playing with the sympathy they received, seemed to themselves so comically ludicrous that, but for its serious side, neither could have kept countenance. Alone, the thought of the lovers not yet being beyond danger hindered their bursting out into laughter.

And lest this, too, might cease to restrain them they seized upon the earliest pretext to get away from the spot.

Glad were they when some of their gentlemen acquaintances, who chanced to be passing the place, came up and proposed escorting them home. A service accepted and, it need

not be said, offered with as much alacrity as it was received.

Their departure had no effect in dispersing the crowd, which had gathered by the Alameda's gate. A spot signalised by an episode, so odd and original, was not to be forsaken in that quick inconsiderate way. Instead, the throng grew quicker, until the street for a long stretch was packed full of people, close as they could stand. Only one part of it remained unoccupied, the central list, showing the open sewer with its bordering of black mud. In their holiday attire the populace declined invading this, though they stood wedging one another along its edge; their faces turned towards it, with hilarity in their looks and laughter on their lips. It was just the sort of spectacle to please them; the sentries in a row—for they had now sneaked back to their post—appearing terribly crest-

fallen, while those over whom they stood guard seemed, on the contrary cheerful—as though expecting soon to be released from their chains. With them it was the *esprit de corps* of the galley slave, glad to see a comrade escape from their common misery, though he cannot escape himself.

All this, however, was tame ; but the winding up of the spectacle in a quiet natural way. It would soon have been over now, and the sight seers scattered off to their homes, but just as they were beginning to retire a new incident claimed their attention. A scene almost as exciting as any that had preceded, though only a single personage appeared in it. This Dominguez, the gaoler, who had been absent all the while at his *pul quera*, and only just warned of the event that had so convulsed the Callé de Plateros, breaking through the crowd like an enraged bull, rushed

along the sewer's edge, flourishing his whip over the heads of the *forzados*, at the same time reviling the sentries for their scandalous neglect of duty? To tell the truth he was more troubled about his own. He had received particular instructions to be watchful of four prisoners—the very ones that had escaped. Well might he dread the reckoning in store for him on return to the gaol. However could he face his governor?

For some time he strode to and fro, venting his drunken spleen alike on soldiers or scavengers. Some of the former would have retaliated; but they knew him to have authority in high places, and therefore kept silent, sullenly enduring it. Not so the spectators, many of whom, knowing, hated him. Possibly, more than probably, some of them had been under his care. But to all he was now affording infinite amusement.

They laughed at his impotent anger, and laughed again, one crying out, "He's as good as a bull in the ring!" another exclaiming, "*Viva el Senor Dominguez rey de las bastoneros!*" ("Hurrah for the Señor Dominguez, king of the turnkeys!")—a sally which elicited roars of applauding laughter.

If angry before he was now infuriated. Purple in the face, he was making a dash at the man whom he suspected of mocking him, when his foot slipped and down he went into the drain head foremost.

He had altogether disappeared, and was for some seconds out of sight; the laughter which had become a yelling chorus, all the while continuing. Nor did it cease when he re-appeared; instead, was louder and more uproarious than ever. For his face, late blue with rage, was now black with a limning of the sewer liquid.

But he was less mad than sad, after the ill-timed tumble. The *douche* had tamed, if not sobered him ; and his only thought now was how to get away from that place of repeated discomfitures, anywhere to hide and wash himself.

Luck declared for him at last, in the approach of a squadron of hussars, drawing off from him the eyes of the spectators ; who had now enough to do looking out for themselves and their safety. For the hussars were coming on at a gallop, with drawn sabres.

A crush and a scampering followed, as they forced their way through the crowd, shouting, and striking with the back of their blades. After they had passed, the people were no longer in a humour for laughing at the " King of the turnkeys," nor any one else ; neither was he there to be laughed at.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A TRANSFORMATION.



WHILE the ladies set down upon the street were still plaintively appealing to those around, the carriage from which they had been so unceremoniously ejected was tearing along the *Callé de San Francisco*, going direct for the *Acordada* ! But nothing could be farther from the thoughts of those in it than a return to that grand gaol, or even approaching its door. All

of them knew there was a regular guard there ; and instead of a single musket missing fire, they would more likely be saluted with a full volley, sending a shower of bullets about their ears. Bad marksmen as the Mexican soldiers are, they could not all miss. But even if they passed through that unscathed, beyond was the *garita* of San Cosmé, with another guard there. Indeed, go what way they would, there was none leading out into the country without a *garita* to be got through—and for the country they were aiming.

In these gates, however, there was a difference as to the strength of their guard detail, and the possibilities of their being passed. All of which one of the fugitives well understood—Rivas, who, as a matter of course, had assumed direction of everything relating to their flight. When opposite the old convent,

which gives its name to the street, he leaned his head out of the carriage window, and said to the *cochero* :

“Take the route by El Nino Perdido. You know the way ; show it to him.”

The “him” was Cris Rock, who still had hold of the reins, and who not understanding Spanish, could not be addressed direct.

The result of the order was, that shortly after, the horses were headed into a side street, indicated to the Texan, by a nod perceptible only to himself. It would not do for the real coachman to appear as aiding their escape ; though there was no danger of the dwarf, observing it—the latter having been crammed down into the box-boot, where he was held with his head between Rock’s huge thighs, as in a vice.

The street into which they had turned was a narrow one running along a dead wall—that

of the ancient monastery, which occupies acres of ground. And in its strip of side-walk just then there was not a pedestrian to be seen—the very thing Rivas had been wishing for. Again speaking out, he said :—

“ Slowly for a bit. I see a *serapé* out there. Tell the Tejanos to put it on.”

For the next hundred yards or so—along the dead wall—the horses went at a walk, they inside the carriage, as also one on the box, all the while busy as bees. And when they came out at the end of the quiet street entering upon a more frequented thoroughfare, the brisk pace was resumed ; though no one could have believed it the same party, seen but a minute or two before driving at a racecourse speed along the *Callé de Plateros*. José alone looked the same, in his sky-blue livery and cockaded hat. But the big man by his side had so far effected a change that his mud-stained

habiliments were hidden under an ample *serapé*, which covered him from neck to ancles ; while the little one was altogether invisible, and under a threat of having his skull kicked in if he attempted to show himself.

Alike quick and complete had been the transformation of the “insides”. There now sat two gentlemen, decently, indeed rather stylishly dressed—one wearing a blue cloth cloak, with velvet collar ; the other a scarlet “manga,” with gold bullion embroidery from neck to shoulders.

About the equipage there was little now to make remark upon, or cause it to be regarded with suspicion. Some rich *haciendado*, who had been at the laying of the foundation-stone, on return to his country house, taking a friend along with him. The strapping fellow on the box might be mayor-domo of the estate—they are usually tall men—who had taken a fancy

to try his hand at driving, and the coachman had surrendered him the reins. All perfectly natural, and *en règle*, even to the rapid speed at which the horses were put. The driver not accustomed to handling the ribbons would account for this. Besides, the sun was getting low, the *casa de campo* might be a good distance from town, and such a splendid turn out, belated on a country road would be like tempting Providence, and certainly the *salteadores* !

How little would its occupants have regarded an encounter with highwaymen. Perhaps just then they would have welcomed it. Nor much did Rivas anticipate further trouble in the streets of the city. He was familiar with those they were now driving along, and felt no fear of being obstructed there—at least by the people. Had they hung their chain out of the carriage window and exposed the prison

dress, no one in that quarter would have cried "Stop thief!" The man who should so cry, would run the risk of having his clamour suddenly silenced.

For all they had apprehensions of the keenest. If they were in no danger while in the streets, they would be when parting from them—at El Nino Perdido. That gauntlet had yet to be run.

But while thinking of it, they had not been idle, instead all the while planning and preparing for it; Rivas instructing the others as to how they should act.

"A *garita* of the usual kind," he said to Kearney, making known the nature of the anticipated obstruction; "a gate across the road, with a guard house alongside. There's sure to be a sergeant and eight or ten files in it. If, by good luck the gate be open, our best way will be to approach gently, then go

through at a gallop. If shut, we'll be called upon to show our best diplomacy. Leave all that to me. Failing to fool the guard we must do battle with it. Anything's better than be taken back to the *Acordada*. That would be sure death for me ; and, if I mistake not, for yourself, Señor."

"I'm sure of it. If we can't get through without, let us fight our way, whatever the result."

"Take this pair, then. They seem the most reliable. You *Americanos* are more skilled in the use of fire-arms than we. With us steel is preferred. But I'll do the best I can with the other pair."

This had reference to two pairs of pistols discovered under the carriage cushions. Nor were they the only weapons there ; besides them were two long-bladed knives, and a pearl handed stiletto—the last a tiny affair, which

looked as though taken from the toilet case of a lady.

“See that yours are loaded and in firing order,” Rivas added, at the same time looking to his own.

The injunction was not needed, as the Irishman was already examining the weapons put into his hand, with a view to their efficiency.

Both pair of pistols were of the old-fashioned duelling kind—flint locks, with barrels nearly a foot in length. Like as not the Condesa’s father, and Don Ignacio Valverde, in days long gone bye, had vindicated honour with them.

The inspection was quick and short, as had been all that preceded; pans sprung open, showing them filled with powder; rammers run into the barrels, then drawn out again, and replaced in their thimbles.

“Mine,” said Kearney, first to report, “are good for two lives.”

“And mine the same,” rejoined Rivas, “unless I’m laid low before I can pull the second trigger. Now to dispose of the knives. My countryman, the *cochero*, however, trustworthy, musn’t show fight. That would ruin all afterwards. But, if I mistake not, your colossal comrade is the man to make play with one of them in a pinch.”

“You may be sure of it. He was in the Alamo with Bowie, and at Goliad with Fanning. Don’t fear putting a knife into his hands; he’ll make good use of it if we’re driven to close quarters.”

“Let him have it, then. You give it, and tell him all.”

Kearney getting hold of one of the two knives, that seeming best suited for the hands he designed putting it in, passed it on to Cris Rock. Not through the carriage window, but a hole cut in the leathern hood by the blade

itself. Speaking through the same, he said :—

“Cris! we’ve got to run a gate where there’s a guard of soldiers—may be a dozen or so. You’re to drive gently up, and, if you see it open, pass through—then lay on the whip. Should it be shut approach more briskly, and pull up impatient-like. But do nothing of yourself—wait till I give you the word.”

“Trust me, cap. ; ye kin do that, I kilk’late.”

“I can, Cris. Take this knife, and if you hear pistols cracking behind, you’ll then know what to do with it.”

“I’ll gie a guess, anyhow,” rejoined the Texan, taking hold of the knife, in a hand passed behind him. Then bringing it forward and under his eyes, he added, “’Taint sech a bad sort o’ blade eyther, tho’ I weesh ’twas my ole bowie they took from me at Mier.

Wal, cap. ; ye kin count on me makin' use o't, ef ca'sion calls, an' more'n one yaller-belly gittin it inter his guts ; not'ithstandin' this durnation clog that's swingin' at my legs. By the jumpin' Geehosophat, if I ked only git shet o' that I'd——"

What he would do or intended saying, had to stay unsaid. Rivas interrupted him, pulling Kearney back, and telling him to be ready with the pistols. For they were nearing the place of danger.





CHAPTER XXXII.

AN UNLOOKED FOR SALUTE.



IN a strict military sense the capital of Mexico cannot be called a fortified city. Still it has defences, one being an *enceinte* wall, which envelops it all round, leaving no straggled suburb, scarce so much as a house outside. Compact and close stand the dwellings of the modern city as those of ancient Tenochtitlan, whose site it occupies, though the waves of Tezcuco and Xochimilco no longer lap up to its walls.

The *enceinte* spoken of is a mere structure of “adobés,” large sun-baked blocks of mud and straw,—in short the bricks of the Egyptians, whose making so vexed Moses and the Israelites. Here and there may be seen a little redoubt, with a battery of guns in it; but only on revolutionary occasions—the wall, so far as defence goes, more concerning the smuggler than the soldier. And less contraband from abroad than infringement of certain regulations of home commerce—chief of them the tax called “alcabala,” corresponding to the *octroi* of France, and the *corvee* of some other European countries.

The tax is collected at the “garitas” of which there is one on every road leading out of the city, or rather into it; for it is the man who enters, not he making exit, who is called upon to contribute to the *alcabala*. It is levied on every article or commodity

brought from the country in search of a city market. Nothing escapes it; the produce of farm and garden, field and forest—all have to pay toll at the *garitas*, so losing a considerable percentage of their value. The brown aboriginal, his “burro” laden with charcoal, or skins of *pulque*, or himself staggering under a load of planks heavy enough to weigh down a donkey, which he has transported from a mountain forest—ten or twenty miles it may be—is mulcted in this black mail before he can pass through a *garita*.

Not unfrequently he is unable to meet the demand till he have made sale of the taxed commodity. On such occasions he hypothecates his hat, or *frezada*, leaving it at the gate, and going on bareheaded, or bare-shouldered, to the market, to redeem the pawned article on return.

Save through these gates there is no access

to, or egress from, the Mexican capital; and at each, besides the official having charge of the revenue matters, a soldier-guard is stationed, with a guard-house provided; their duties being of a mixed three-cornered kind—customs, police and military. Five or six such posts there are, on the five or six roads leading out from the city; like the radiating limbs of a star-fish; and one of these is the *garita*, El Nino Perdido—literally the gate of the “Lost Child”. It is, however, one through which the traffic is of secondary importance; since it is not on any of the main routes of travel. That which it bars is but a country road, communicating with the villages of Mixcoac, Coyoacan, and San Angel. Still, these being places of rural residence, where some of the *familiares principes* have country houses, a carriage passing through the gate of the Lost Child is no rarity.

Besides, from the gate itself runs a *Calzada*, or causeway, wide and straight for nearly two miles, with a double row of grand old trees along each side whose pleasant shade invites, and often receives, visits from city excursionists out for a stroll, ride or drive. Near the end of the second mile it angles abruptly to the right, in the direction of San Angel—a sharp corner, the writer has good reason to remember, having been shot at by *Salteadores*, luckily missed, while passing round it on his way from country quarters to the city. A horse of best blood saved *his* blood there, or this tale would never have been told.

Asking the reader's pardon for a personal digression—with the excuse that it may throw light on the scene to follow—it will be understood how easily the guard on duty at the gate might be “thrown off guard” by a carriage passing through it; especially on

that day when there were so many, by reasons of the grand doings in the city.

Several had just passed, going country-wards ; for it was the season of rural sojourn among the "ricos". So when another appeared, heading in the same direction, the guard sergeant at Nino Perdido saw nothing amiss, or to be suspicious of ; instead, something to inspire him with respect. He had been on guard at the Palace scores of times ; and by appearance knew all who were accustomed to pass in and out, more especially those holding authority. Liveries he could distinguish at any distance ; and when he saw a carriage approaching along the street, with a coachman in sky-blue and silver, cockaded, he did not need its being near to recognise the equipage of one of the Cabinet Ministers.

Though a non-commissioned officer, he was

a man of ambitious aims ; dreaming of gold bullion in the shape of epaulettes ; and he had long had his eye on the epaulette of an *alferez*—officers of this rank being allowed only one. The good word of a Cabinet Minister, whether war, navy, or *Hacienda*, could give him what he was wishing for, easy at a nod ; and here was an opportunity of winning it.

“ *Cabo !* ” he cried out to his corporal, in a flurry of excitement, “ throw open the gate—quick ! Fall in, men ! Dress up—ready to present arms. See that you do it handsomely ! ”

It was in his favour, and so he congratulated himself, that the carriage came on rather slowly ; so that he had ample time to get his half-dozen files well set-up, and dressed for the salute.

There was some buttoning of jackets, stocks to be adjusted round shirtless necks,

with shakos to be searched for inside the guard-house, and hurriedly clapped on. Still it was all got through in good time; and, when at length the carriage came abreast, the guard was found standing at "present arms," the sergeant himself saluting in the most gracious manner.

They inside, knowing how, returned the salute in true soldier style, though with a surprised expression upon their faces. No wonder. Where they had anticipated difficulty and danger, they were received with more than civility—accorded military honours!



CHAPTER XXXIII.

“IS IT A GRITO?”



HE soldiers of the guard had ground-
ed arms, and were sauntering back
to their benches, when something
came into the sergeant's mind which caused
him misgiving. Was it possible he had
been paying honours to those undeserving
of them?

He was sure of it being the carriage of
Don Ignacio Valverde ; his horses and livery

too. But nothing more. None of the party was known to him as belonging to Don Ignacio's family or servants. For José was but groom or second coachman, who occasionally drove out his young mistress, but never to the palace, or other place, where the sergeant had been on duty.

Equally a stranger to him was the big fellow on the box who had hold of the reins, as also one of the gentlemen inside. It occurred to him, however, that the face of the other was familiar—awakening the memories of more than ordinary interest.

"*Mil diablos!*" he muttered to himself as he stood gazing after the retreating equipage, "If that wasn't my old captain, Don Ruperto Rivas, there isn't another man in Mexico more like him. I heard say he had turned *Salteador*, and they'd taken him only the other day. *Carria!* what's that?"

The carriage, as yet not over a hundred yards from the *garita*, still going on at a rather moderate pace, was seen suddenly to increase its speed: in fact, the horses had started off at a gallop! Nor was this from any scare or fright, but caused by a sharp cut or two of the whip; as he could tell by seeing the arm of the big man on the box several times raised above the roof, and vigorously lowered again. Extraordinary behaviour on his part, how was it to be accounted for? And how explain that of the gentleman inside, who appeared satisfied with the changed pace? At all events they were doing naught to prevent it, for again and again the whip strokes were repeated! None of the party were intoxicated; at least they had no appearance of it when they passed the gate. A little excited-looking; though no more than

might be expected in men returning from a public procession. But an elegant light equipage with horses in full gallop, so unlike the carriage of a Cabinet Minister! What the mischief could it mean?

The guard sergeant had just asked himself the question, when, hark! a gun fired at the Citadela! Soon after another from the military college of Chapultepec! And from the direction of the Plaza Grande the ringing of bells! First those of the Cathedral, then of the Acordada, and the convent of San Francisco, with other convents and churches, till there was a clangour all over the city!

Hark again! A second gun from the citadel, quick followed by another from Chapultepec, evidently signals and their responses!

"What the *demonio* is it? A *pronunciamiento*?"

Not only did the sergeant thus interrogate, but all the soldiers under his command, putting the question to one another. It would be nothing much to surprise them, least of all himself. He was somewhat of a veteran, and had seen nigh a score of revolutions, counting *emeutes*.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if it is,” he suggested, adding as a third gun boomed out from the Citadel, “It must be a *grito*!”

“Who’s raising it this time, I wonder?” said one of the soldiers, all now in a flurry of excited expectancy.

Several names of noted *militarios* were mentioned at a venture. But no one could say for certain, nor even give a guess with any confidence. They could hardly yet realise its being the breaking out of a *pronunciamento*, since there had been no late

tampering with them—the usual preliminary to revolutions.

It might not be after all. But they would be better able to decide should they hear the rattle of small arms, and for this listened they all ears.

More than one of them would have been delighted to hear it. Not that they disliked the *régime* of the Dictator nor the man himself. Like all despots he was the soldier's friend; professed and giving proofs of it, by indulging them in soldierly licence—permission to lord it over the citizen. But much as they liked “El Cojo” (game leg), as they called him, a *grito* would be still more agreeable to them—promising unlimited loot.

The sergeant had views of his own, and reflections he kept to himself. He felt good as sure there was something up, and could not help connecting it with the carriage which

had just passed. He now no longer doubted having seen his old captain in it. But how came he to be there, and what doing? He had been in the city that's certain—was now out of it, and going at a speed that must mean something more than common. He could get to San Augustin by that route. There were troops quartered there. Had they declared for the Liberals?

It might be so, and Rivas was on his way to meet and lead them on to the city. At any moment they might appear on the *calzada*, at the corner round which the carriage had just turned.

The sergeant was now in a state of nervous perplexity. Although his eyes were on the road his thoughts were not there, but all turned inward, communing with himself. Which side ought he to take? That of the *Liberales* or the *Parti Pretre*? He had been

upon both through two or three alternate changes, and still he was but a *sargento*. And as he had been serving Santa Anna for a longer spell than usual, without a single step of promotion, he could not make much of a mistake by giving the Republican party one more trial. It might get him the long-covetted epaulette of *alferez*.

While still occupied with his ambitious dreams, endeavouring to decide into which scale he should throw the weight of his sword, musket, and bayonet, the citadel gun once more boomed out, answered by the cannon of Chapultepec.

Still, there was no cracking of rifles, nor continuous rattle of musketry, such as should be heard coincident with that cry which in the Mexican metropolis usually announces a change of government.

It seemed strange not only to him, but all

others on guard at El Nino. But it might be a parley—the calm before the storm, which they could not help thinking would yet burst forth, in full fusilade—such as they had been accustomed to.

Listening on, however, they heard not that ; only the bells, bells, bells, jingling all over the city as though it were on fire ; those of the cathedral leading the orchestra of campanule music. And yet another gun from the Citadel with the answering one from the “ Summer Palace of the Monctezunas ”.

They were fast losing patience, beginning to fear there would be no *pronunciamento* after all, and no chance of plundering, when the notes of a cavalry bugle broke upon their ears.

“ At last ! ” cried one, speaking the mind of all, and as though the sound were a relief to them. “ That’s the beginning of it. So,

camarados! we may get ready. The next thing will be the cracking of carbines!”

They all ran to the stack of muskets, each clutching at his own. They stood listening as before; but not to hear any cracking of carbines. Instead, the bugle again brayed out its trumpet notes, recognisable as signals of command; which, though only infantry men, they understood. There was the “Quick march!” and “Double quick!” but they had no time to reflect on what it was for, nor need, as just then a troop of hussars was seen defiling out from a side street, and coming on towards them at a charging gallop.

In a few seconds they were up to the gate, which, being still open, they could have passed through, without stop or parley. For all, they made both, the commanding officer suddenly reining up, and shouting back along the line:

“ *Alto !* ”

The “ halt ” was proclaimed by the trumpeter at his side, which brought the galloping cohort to a stand.

“ *Sargento !* ” thundered he at their head to the guard-sergeant who, with his men re-formed, was again at “ Present arms,” “ has a carriage passed you, guard—a landau—grey horses—five men in it ? ”

“ Only four men, Señor Colonel. But all the rest as you describe it.”

“ Only four ! What can that mean ? Was there a coachman in light blue livery—silver facings ? ”

“ The same, Señor Colonel.”

“ That’s it, sure ; must be. How long since it passed ? ”

“ Not quite twenty minutes, Señor Colonel. It’s just gone round the corner ; yonder where you see the dust stirring.”

"*Adelante!*" cried the colonel, without waiting to question further, and as the trumpet gave out the "Forward—gallop!" the hussar troop went sweeping through the gate, leaving the guard-sergeant and his men in a state of great mystification and no little chagrin; he, their chief spokesman, saying with a sorrowful air;


"Well, *hombres!* It don't look like a *grito*, after all!"





CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN ILL-USED COACHMAN.

UCH forethought?" exclaimed Rivas, as the landau went rattling along the road with the speed of a war-chariot, "Wonderful!" he went on. "Ah, for cleverness, commend me to a woman—when her will's in it. We men are but simpletons to them. My glorious Ysabel. She's the sort for a soldier's wife. But don't let me be claiming all the credit for

her. Fair play to the Senorita Valverde ; who has, I doubt not, done her share of the contriving—on your account, Señor.”

The Señor so spoken to had no doubt of it either, and would have been grieved to think otherwise, but he was too busy at the moment to say much, and only signified his assent in monosyllables. With head down, and arms in see-sawing motion—he was endeavouring to cut their coupling-chain ; the tool he handled being a large file ; another of the “something” to be found under the cushions—as found it was ! No wonder Don Ruperto’s enthusiastic admiration of the providence which had placed it there.

Handy with workmen’s tools as with war-like weapons, the young Irishman had laid hold of it as soon as they were safe through the *garita*, and was now rasping away with might and main ; the other keeping the chain in place.

It was not a task to be accomplished without time. The links were thick as a man's finger, and would need no end of filing before they could be parted. Still, there was little likelihood of their being interrupted until it could be done. There was nobody on the road, and only here and there some labourers at work in the adjoining fields, too busy to take note of them, or what they were at. The sight of a passing carriage would be nothing strange, and the horses going at a gallop would but lead to the supposition of its being a party of "jovenes dorados" driving out into the country who had taken too much wine before starting.

But even though these poor prolitarians knew all, there was nothing to be apprehended for any action on their part. Conspiracies and *pronunciamentos* were not in their line ; and the storm of revolution might burst over their

heads without their caring what way it went, or even enquiring who was its promoter. So the escaping prisoners took little pains to conceal what they were at. Speed was now more to their purpose than strategy, and they were making their best of it, both to get on along the road, and have their legs free for future action.

“We might have passed safely through that gate,” said the Mexican, who still continued to do the talking, “even had they known who we were.”

“Indeed ! how ?”

“You saw that sergeant who saluted us ?”

“Of course I did, and the grand salute he gave ! He couldn’t have made it more impressive had it been the Commander-in-Chief of your army, or the Dictator himself who was passing.”

“And I fancy it was just something of

the kind that moved him. Doubtless, the livery of the coachman which he would know to be that of Don Ignacio Valverde."

"You think he got us through?"

"Yes. But it wouldn't have done so if he'd known what was up. Though something else might—that is his knowing *me*."

"Oh! he knows you?"

"He does; though I'm not sure he recognised me in passing, as I did him. Odd enough, his being there just then. He was corporal in a company I once commanded, and I believe liked me as his captain. He's an old schemer, though; has turned his coat times beyond counting; and just as well there's been no call for trusting him. He'll catch it for letting us slip past without challenge; and serve him right, wearing the colours he now does. Ha! they've waked up at last! I was expecting that."

It was the first gun at the Citadel which called forth these exclamations, soon followed by the ding-dong of the city bells.

“*Carrai!*” he continued, “we’re no doubt being pursued now, and by cavalry; some of those we saw in the Procession. It begins to look bad. Still, with so much start, and this fine pair of friones, I’ve not much fear of their overtaking us, till we reach the point I’m making for; unless, indeed——”

“Unless what?” asked Kearney, seeing he had interrupted himself, and was looking out apprehensively.

“That! There’s your answer,” said the Mexican, pointing to a puff of smoke that had just shot out from the summit of an isolated hill on which were batteries and buildings; “Chapultepec—a gun!” he added, and the bang came instantly after.

“We’ll have it hot enough now,” he con-

tinued, in a tone telling of alarm. "There's sure to be cavalry up yonder. If they're cleverly led, and know which way to take, they may head us off yet, in spite of all we can do. Lay on the whip," he shouted out to the coachman.

And the whip was laid on, till the horses galloped faster than ever, leaving behind a cloud of dust, which extended back for more than a mile.

The road they were on was the direct route to San Angel; and through this village Rivas had intended going, as he had no reason to believe there were troops stationed in it. But Chapultepec was nearer to it than the point where they themselves were, and cavalry now starting from the latter could easily reach San Angel before them. But there was a branch road leading to Coyoacan, and as that would give them some advantage, he determined on taking it.

And now another gun at the Citadel, with the response from Chapultepec, and, soon after, the third booming from both. But meanwhile, something seen at the castle-crowned hill which deepened the anxious expression on the face of the Mexican.

“*Santos Dios!*” he exclaimed, “just as I expected. Look yonder, Señor!”

Kearney looked, to see a stream pouring out from the castle gates and running down the steep causeway which zig-zags to the bottom of the hill. A stream of men in uniform, by their square crowned shakos and other insignia, recognisable as Lancers. They had neither weapons nor horses with them; but both, as Rivas knew, would be at the *Cuartel* and stables below. He also knew that the *Lanzeros* were trained soldiers—a petted arm of the service—and it would not take them long to “boot and saddle”.

More than ever was his look troubled now, still not despairing. He had his hopes and plans.

“Drop your file, Senor,” he said hurriedly ; “no time to finish that now. We must wait for a better opportunity. And we’ll have to leave the carriage behind ; but not just yet.”

By this they had arrived at the embouchure of the branch road coming out from Cayocaon, into which by his direction the horses were headed, going on without stop or slackening of speed. And so for nearly another mile then he called out to those on the box to bring up.

Rock anticipating something of the sort, instantly reined in, and the carriage came to a stand. At which the two inside sprang out upon the road, Kearney calling to the Texan :

“Drop the reins, Cris! Down; unhitch the horses. Quick!”

And quick came he down, jerking the dwarf after, who fell upon all fours! as he recovered his feet, looking as if he had lost his senses. No one heeded him or his looks; the hurry was too great even to stay for unbuckling.

“Cut everything off!” cried Kearney, still speaking to Rock. “Leave on only the bridles.”

With the knife late put into his hands the Texan went to work, Kearney himself plying the other, while Rivas held the horses and unhooked the bearing reins.

Soon pole-pieces and hame-straps were severed; and the *frisiones* led forward left all behind, save the bridles and collars.

“Leave the collars on,” said Rivas seeing there was no time to detach them. “Now,

we mount two and two; but first to dispose of him."

The "him" was José still seated on the box, apparently in a state of stupor.

"Pull him down, Cris! Tie him to the wheel!" commanded Kearney. "The driving reins will do it."

The Texan knew how to handle tying gear, as all Texans do, and in a trice the unresisting *cochero* was dragged from his seat and bound, Ixion-like, to one of the carriage wheels.

But Rock had not done with him yet. There was a necessity for something more which looked like wanton cruelty—as they wished it to look. This was the opening of the poor fellow's mouth, and gagging him with the stock of his own whip!

So rendered voiceless, and helpless he

saw the four forzados, two-and-two, get upon his horses and ride off, the only one who vouchsafed to speak a parting word being the dwarf—he calling back in a jocular way :

“ *Adios, Señor cochero!* May your journey be as pleasant as your coach is slow, Ha-ha-ha !”





CHAPTER XXXV.

DOUBLE MOUNTED.



HE labourers hoeing among the young maize plants, and the *tlachiquero* drawing the sap from his magueys, saw a sight to astonish them. Two horses of unusual size, both carrying double, and going at full gallop as if running a race—on one of them two men in cloaks, blue and scarlet ; the other ridden by a giant, with a mis-shapen monkey-like creature clinging on the croup

behind—harness bridles, with collars dancing loose around their necks—chains hanging down and clanking at every bound they made—all this along field paths, in an out-of-the-way neighbourhood where such horses and such men had never been seen before ! To the cultivator of “milpas” and the collector of “aguamiel” it was a sight not only to astonish, but inspire them with awe, almost causing the one to drop his hoe, the other his half-filled hogskin, and take to their heels. But both being of the pure Aztecan race, long subdued and submissive, yet still dreaming of a return to its ancient rule and glories, they might have believed it their old monarchs Montezuna and Guatimozin, come back again, or the god Oatluetzale himself.

In whatever way the spectacle affected them, they were not permitted long to look upon it. For the galloping pace was kept up without

halt or slowing ; the strange-looking horses—with the men upon their backs, still stranger to look at—soon entered a *chapparal*, which bordered the maize and maguey fields, and so passing out of sight.

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“ We’re near the end of our ride now,” said Rivas to Kearney, after they had been some time threading their way through the thicket, the horses from necessity going at a walk. “ If ’twere not for this ironmongery around our ankles, I could almost say we’re safe. Unfortunately, where we’ve got to go the chains will be a worse impediment than ever. *Carramba!* The file! Have we forgotten it?”

“ No,” answered Kearney, drawing it from under his cloak, and holding it up.

“ Thoughtful of you, *caballero*. In the haste, I had ; and we should have been helpless without it, or at all events awkwardly fixed.

If we only had time to use it now. But we haven't—not so much as a minute to spare. Besides the lances from Chapultepec, there's a cavalry troop of some kind—hussars I take it, coming on from the city. While we were cutting loose from the carriage I fancied I heard a bugle call in the direction cityward. Of course, with guns and bells signalling, we may expect pursuit from every point of the compass. Had we kept to the roads we'd have been met somewhere. As it is, if they give us another ten minutes' grace, I'll take you into a place where there's not much fear of our being followed—by mounted men anyhow."

Kearney heard this without comprehending. Some hiding place, he supposed, known to the Mexican. It could only mean that. But where? Looking ahead, he saw the mountains with their sides forest-clad, and there a fugitive might find concealment. But they were

miles off; and how were they to be reached by men afoot—to say nothing of the chains—with cavalry in hue and cry all around them? He put the question.

“Don’t be impatient, *amigo?*” said the Mexican in response; “you’ll soon see the place I speak of, and that will be better than any description I could give. It’s a labyrinth which would have delighted Dædalus himself. *Mira!* You behold it now!”

He pointed to a *facade* of rock, grey rugged, and precipitous, trending right and left through the *chapparal* far as they could see. A cliff, in short, though of no great elevation; on its crest, growing yuccas, cactus, and stunted mezquite trees.

“The *Pedregal!*” he added, in a cheerful voice, “and glad am I to see it. I’ve to thank old Vulcan or Pluto for making such a place. It has saved my life once before, and

I trust will do the same now, for all of us. But we must be quick about it. *Adelante!*”

The horses were urged into a final spurt of speed, and soon after arrived at the base of the rocky escarpment, which would have barred them further advance in that direction had the intention been to take them on. But it was not.

“We must part from them, now,” said Rivas. “Dismount all!”

All four slipped off together, Rock taking hold of both bridles, as if he waited to be told what to do.

“We mustn’t leave them here,” said the Mexican. “They might neigh, and so guide our pursuers to the spot. In another hour, or half that, we needn’t care; it’ll be dark then—”

He interrupted himself, seeming to reflect, which, the Texan observing, said to Kearney:

“He weeshes the anymals sent off, do he?”

“Just that, Cris.”

“I war thinkin’ o’ thet same, meself. The groun’ for a good spell back, hez been hard as flint, an’ we hain’t left much o’ trail, nothing as a set o’ bunglin’ yaller-bellies air like ter take up. As for startin’ the horses, that’s easy as fallin’ off a log. Let me do ’t.”

“Do it?”

“Take holt o’ one then, cap. Unbuckle the neck strap and pull off the bridle, when you see me do so wi’ t’other. It is a pity to act cruel to the poor brutes arter the sarvice they’ve did us; but thar ain’t no help for ’t. Riddy, air ye?”

“Ready!”

The Texan had taken out his knife; and in another instant its blade was through the horse’s ear, the bridle jerked off at the same time. The animal, uttering a terrified snort,

reared up, spun round, and broke away in frenzied flight through the thorny *chapparal*. The other, also released, bounded after, both soon passing out of sight.

“*Bueno—bravo!*” cried the Mexican admiringly, relieved of his dilemma. “Now, señors, we must continue the march afoot, and over ground that’ll need help from our hands, too. *Vamonos!*”

Saying which, he took up the bridles, tossed them over the crest of the cliff; then ascended himself, helping Kearney. There was no path; but some projections of the rock—ledges, with the stems of cactus plants growing upon them—made the ascent possible. The Texan swarmed up after, with hunchback at his heels; as he got upon the top, turning suddenly round, laying hold of the chain, and with a “Jee up,” hoisting the creature feet foremost!

Another second and they were all out of sight ; though not a second too soon. For as they turned their backs upon the cliff they could hear behind, on the farther edge of the thicket through which they had passed, the signal calls of a cavalry bugle.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PEDREGAL.



INTERESTING as is the Mexican Valley in a scenic sense, it is equally so in the geological one; perhaps no part of the earth's crust of like limited area offering greater attractions to him who would study the lore of the rocks. There he may witness the action of both Plutonic and Volcanic forces, not alone in records of the buried past, but still existing,

and too oft making display of their mighty power in the earthquake and the burning mountain.

There also may be observed the opposed processes of deposition and denudation in the silting up of great lakes, and the down wearing of hills by tropical rain storms with the river torrents resulting from them.

Nor is any portion of this elevated plateau more attractive to the geologist than that known as "El Pedregal"; a tract lying in its south-western corner, contiguous to the Cerro de Adjusco, whose summit rises over it to a height of 6,000 feet and 13,000 above the level of the sea.

It is a field of lava vomited forth from Adjusco itself in ages long past, which, as it cooled, became rent into fissures and honey-combed with cavities of every conceivable shape. Spread over many square miles of

surface it renders this part of the valley almost impassable. No wheeled vehicle can be taken across it ; and even the Mexican horse and mule—both sure-footed as goats—get through it with difficulty, and only by one or two known paths. To the pedestrian it is a task ; and there are places into which he even cannot penetrate without scaling cliffs and traversing chasms deep and dangerous. It bristles with cactus, zuccas, and other forms of crystalline vegetation, characteristic of a barren soil. But there are spots of great fertility—hollows where the volcanic ashes were deposited—forming little *oases*, into which the honest Indian finds his way for purposes of cultivation. Others less honest seek refuge in its caves and coverts, fugitives from justice and the gaols—not always criminals, however, for within it

the proscribed patriot and defeated soldier oft find an asylum.

In the four individuals who had now entered there was all this variety, if he who directed their movements was what the Condesa Almonté described him. In any case, he appeared familiar with the place and its ways, saying to Kearney, as they went on :

“No thanks to me for knowing all about the Pedregal. I was born on its edge ; when a boy bird-nested and trapped armadilloes all over it. Twisted as this path is, it will take us to a spot where we needn't fear any soldiers following us—not this night anyhow. To-morrow they may, and welcome.”

Their march was continued, but not without great difficulty, and much exertion of their strength. They were forced to clamber over masses of rock, and thread their way through

thickets of cactus, whose spines sharp as needles lacerated their skins. With the coupling chains still on, it was all the more difficult to avoid them.

Luckily, they had not far to go before arriving at the place where their conductor deemed it safe to make a stop. About this, there was nothing particular, more than its being a hollow, where they could stand upright without danger of being seen from any of the eminences around. Descending into it, Rivas said :—

“Now Don Florencio ; you can finish the little job you were interrupted at, without much fear of having to knock off again.”

At which he raised the chain, and held it rested on something firmer than the cushion of a carriage. So placed, the file made better progress, and in a short time the link was cut through, letting them walk freely apart.

“*Caballero !*” exclaimed the Mexican, assuming an attitude as if about to propose a toast, “may our friendship be more difficult to sever than that chain, and hold us longer together—for life, I hope.”

Kearney would not have been a son of Erin to refuse reciprocating the pretty compliment, which he did with all due warmth and readiness.

But his work was not over. Rock and Zorillo had yet to be uncoupled ; the former, perhaps, longing to be delivered more than any of the four. He had conceived a positive disgust for the hunchback ; though as already said, less on account of the creature’s physical than moral deformity, of which last he had ample evidence during the short while they were together. Nor had it needed for him to understand what the latter said. A natural physiognomist, he could read in Zorillo’s eyes .

the evil disposition of the animal from which he drew his name.

As Kearney approached him with the file, the Texan raising his foot, and planting it on a ledge of rock, said :

“Cut through thar, Cap. : the link as air nixt to my ankle-clasp.”

This was different to what had been done with the other which had been severed centrally. It was not intended to take off the whole of the chains yet. The Mexican said there was no time for so much filing ; that must be done when they got further on.

“Yer see, Cap.” added Rock, giving a reason for the request. “’Fore it’s all over, who knows I mayen’t need full leg freedom ’ithoot any hamper. So gie the dwarf the hul o’ the chain to carry. He desarve to hev it, or suthin’ else, round his thrapple ’stead o’ his leg. This chile have been contagious to

the grist o' queer company in his perambulations roun and about ; but niver sech as he. The sight of him air enough to give a nigger the gut ache."

And in his quaint vernacular he thus rambled on at the time Kearney was at work, his rude speech being an appropriate symphony to the rasping of the file.

He at the other end of the coupling chain lay squatted along the ground, saying not a word, but his eyes full of sparkle and mischief, as those of an enraged rattle-snake. Still there was fear in his face : for though he could not tell what was being said, he fancied it was about himself, and anything but in his favour. He was with the other three, but not of them ; his conscience told him that. He was in their way, too ; had been all along, and would be hereafter. What if they took into their heads to rid themselves of him in some violent

manner? They might cut his throat with one of the knives he had seen them make such dexterous use of! Reflecting in this fashion, no wonder he was apprehensive.

Something was going to be done to him different from the rest he felt sure. After the chain had been got apart the other three drew off to a distance, and stood as if deliberating. It must be about himself.

And about him it was—the way to dispose of him.

“I hardly know what we’re to do with the little beast,” said Rivas. “Leave him here loose we daren’t; he’d slip back again, good as certain, and too soon for our safety. If we tie him he will cry out, and might be heard. We’re not far enough away. *Oiga!* They’re beating up the cover we’ve just come out of. Yes; they’re in the *chapparal* now!”

It was even so, as could be told by the

occasional call of a bugle sounding skirmish signals.

“Why not tie and gag him too?” asked Kearney.

“Sure we could do that. But it wouldn’t be safe either. They might find their way here at once. But if they didn’t find it at all, and no one came along——”

“Ah! I see,” interrupted the Irishman, as the inhumanity of the thing became manifest to him. “He might perish, you mean?”

“Just so. No doubt the wretch deserves it. From all I’ve heard of him he does richly. But we are not his judges, and have no right to be his executioners.”

Sentiments not such as might have been expected from the lips of a bandit!

“No, certainly not,” rejoined Kearney, hastening to signify his approval of them.

“What do *you* think we should do with

him, Rock ?" he added, addressing himself to the Texan, who quite comprehended the difficulty.

"Wal' Cap. ; 't'ud be marciful to knock him on the head at onc't, than leave him to gasp it out with a stopper in his mouth ; as ye say the Mexikin thinks he mout. But thar ain't no need for eyther. Why not toat him along ? Ef he should bother us I kin heist him on my back, easy enuf. Augly burden he'd be, tho' 'taint for the weight o' him."

The Texan's suggestion, was entertained, no other course seeming safe, except at the probable sacrifice of the creature's life. And that none of them contemplated for a moment. In fine, it was determined to take him on.

The colloquy now coming to an end, Rivas and the Irishman caught up the pieces of chain still attached to their ankles, each making the end of his own fast round his

wrist, so as not to impede their onward march. This done they all moved on again, the Mexican, of course, foremost, Kearney at his heels. After him, Cris Rock, chain in hand, half leading, half dragging the dwarf, as a showman might his monkey.


In this way there was no danger of his betraying them. He could shout and still have been heard by those behind. But an expressive gesture of the Texan admonished him that if he made a noise, it would be the last of him.





CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SUSPICION OF CONNIVANCE.

“USPICIOUS, to say the least of it! If a coincidence, certainly the strangest in my experience, or that I’ve ever heard of. A score of other carriages passing, and they to have chosen that one of all! *Carrai!* it cannot have been chance—improbable—impossible!”

So soliloquised the Chief Magistrate of Mexico, after receiving a report of what had

occurred in the *Callé de Plateros*. He had as yet only been furnished with a general account of it; but particularising the prisoners who had escaped, with their mode of making off, as also whose carriage they had seized upon. He had been told, also, that there were two ladies in it, but needed not telling who they were.

All this was made known by a messenger who came post-haste to the Palace, soon after the occurrence. He had been sent by Colonel Santander, who could not come himself; too busy getting the hussars into their saddles for the pursuit—for he it was who led it. And never did man follow fugitives with more eagerness to overtake them, or more bitter chagrin in their flight.

Not much, if anything, less was that of Santa Anna himself, as he now sat reflecting over it. He, too, had seen the two Texans.

with Rivas in the sewers ; the latter a well-known enemy in war, and, as he late believed, a dangerous rival in love. He had glanced exultingly at him, with the thought of that danger past. The rebel proscribed, and for years sought for, had at length been found ; was in his power, with life forfeit, and the determination it should be taken. That but a short hour ago, and now the doomed man was free again !

But surely not ? With a squadron of cavalry in pursuit, cannon booming, bells ringing, every military post and picket for miles round on the alert, surely four men chained two and two, conspicuous in a grand carriage could not eventually get off.

It might seem so ; still the thing was possible, as Santa Anna had reason to know. A man of many adventures he had himself more than once eluded a pursuing enemy with chances little better.

He sat chewing the cud of disappointment, though not patiently, nor keeping all the time to his chair. Every now and then he rose to his feet, made stumping excursions round the room, repeatedly touched the bell, to inquire whether any news had been received of the fugitive party.

The aide-de-camp in attendance could not help wondering at all this, having had orders to report instantly whatever word should be brought in. Besides, why should the great Generalissimo be troubling himself about so small a matter as the escape of three or four prisoners, seeming excited as if he had lost a battle.

The cause of this excitement the Dictator alone knew, keeping it to himself. He was still in the dark as to certain details of what had transpired, and had sent for the governor of the Acordada, who should be able to supply them.

Meantime he went about muttering threats against this one and that one, giving way to bitter reflections; one bitterest of all, that there had been a suspicion of connivance at the escape of the prisoners. But to this there was a sweet side as well; so some words uttered by him would indicate.

“Ah, Condesa! You may be clever—you are. But if I find you’ve had a hand in this, and it can be proved to the world, never was a woman in a man’s power more than you’ll be in mine. Title, riches, family influence, all will be powerless to shield you. In the cell of a prison where I may yet have the pleasure of paying you a visit, you won’t be either so proud, or so scornful, as you’ve shown yourself in a palace this same day. *Veremos*—we shall see.”

“Don Pedro Arias.”

It was an aide-de-camp announcing the Governor of the Acordada.

“Conduct him in.”

Without delay the prison official was ushered into the presence, looking very sad and cowed-like. Nor did the reception accorded him have a restoring influence; instead the reverse.

“What’s all this, I hear?” thundered out the disposer of punishments and of places; “you’ve been letting your prisoners bolt from you in whole batches. I suppose by this time the Acordada will be empty.”

“*Excellentissimo!* I am very sorry to say that four of them——”

“Yes; and of the four, two of them you had orders to guard most strictly—rigorously.”

“I admit it, Sire, but——”

“Sirrah ! you needn’t waste words excusing yourself. Your conduct shall be inquired into by-and-bye. What I want now is to know the circumstances—the exact particulars of this strange affair. So answer the questions I put to you without concealment or prevarication.”

The gaol governor, making humble obeisance, silently awaited the examination, as a witness in the box who fears he may himself soon stand in the dock.

“To begin : why did you send those four prisoners out with the chain-gang ?”

“By order of Colonel Santander, Sire. He said it was your Excellency’s wish.”

“Humph ! Well, that’s comprehensible. And so far you’re excusable. But how came it you didn’t see to their being better guarded ?”

“Sire, I placed them in charge of the chief turnkey—a man named Dominguez—whom I had found most trustworthy on other occasions. To-day being exceptional, on account of the ceremonies, he was pressed to take drink, and I’m sorry to say got well-nigh drunk. That will explain his neglect of duty.”

“It seems there were two ladies in the carriage. You know who they were, I suppose?”

“By inquiry I have ascertained, your Excellency. One was the Countess Almonté, the other Don Luisa Valverde, as your Excellency will know, the daughter of him to whom the equipage belonged.”

“Yes, yes. I know all that. I have been told the carriage made stop directly opposite to where these men were at work. Was that so?”

“It was, Sire.”

“And have you heard how the stoppage came about?”

“Yes, *Excellentissimo*. The horses shied at something and brought the wheels into a bank of mud. Then the *cochero*, who appears to be a stupid fellow, pulled them up, when he ought to have forced them on. While they were at rest the four *forzados* made a rush, two right into the carriage, the other two up to the box; one of these last, the big *Tejano*, getting hold of the reins and whip, and driving off at a gallop. They had only one sentry to pass in the direction of San Francisco. He, like Dominguez, was too far gone in drink, so there was nothing to stop them—except the guards at the garitas. And, I’m sorry to say, the sergeant at El Nino Perdita let them pass through without so much as challenging.

His account is that, seeing the carriage belonged to one of your Excellency's Ministers, he never thought of stopping it, and should not. Why should he, Sire?"

This touch of obsequious flattery seemed to mollify the Dictator's wrath, or it had by this otherwise expended itself, as evinced by his rejoinder in a more tranquil tone. Indeed, his manner became almost confidential.

"Don Pedro," he said, "I'm satisfied with the explanation you give, so far as regards your own conduct in the affair. But now, tell me; do you think the ladies who were in the carriage had anything to do with the drawing up of the horses? Or was it all an accident?"

"Will your Excellency allow me a moment to reflect? I had thought something of that before; but—"

“Think of it again. Take time and give me your opinion. Let it be a truthful one, Don Pedro; there’s much depending on it.”

Thus appealed to, the gaol governor stood for a time silent, evidently cudgelling his brains. He made mental review of all that had been told him about the behaviour of the young ladies, both before they were turned out of the carriage and after. He was himself aware of certain relations, friendly at least, supposed to exist between one of them and one of the escaped prisoners, and had thought it strange, too, that particular equipage being chosen. Still, from all he could gather, after ample inquiry, he was forced to the conclusion that the thing was unpremeditated—at least on the part of the ladies.

This was still his belief, after reflecting as he had been enjoined to do. In support of it he stated the facts as represented to him,

how the *Senoritas* had been forced from the carriage, almost pitched into the street, their costly dresses dirtied and damaged, themselves showing wildest affright. Still, this was strange, too, on the part of the *Condesa*; and in fine Don Pedro, after further cross-questioning, was unable to say whether there had been connivance or not.

After giving such an unsatisfactory account of the matter he was dismissed, rather brusquely; and returned to the *Acordada*, with an ugly apprehension that instead of continuing governor of this grand gaol, with a handsome salary and snug quarters, he might ere long be himself the occupant of one of its cells, set apart for common prisoners.



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE REPORT OF THE PURSUER.



WITH unappeased impatience the Dictator awaited the return of the pursuing party, or some news of it. The last he in time received at first hand, from the lips of its leader, who after nightfall had hastened back to the city, and reported himself at the Palace.

“You have taken them?” interrogated Santa Anna, as the Hussar officer, no longer

in a glitter of gold lace, but dim with sweat and dust, was ushered into his presence.

He put the question doubtingly ; indeed from the expression on Santander's face almost sure of receiving a negative answer. Negative it was :

“Not yet, Sire ; I regret to say they are still at large.”

The rejoinder was preceded by a string of exclamatory phrases ill becoming the Chief of the State. But Santa Anna, being a soldier, claimed a soldier's privilege of swearing, and among his familiars, was accustomed to it as any common trooper. After venting a strong ebullition of oaths, he calmed down a little, saying :

“Give me a full account of what you've seen and done.”

This was rendered in detail, from the time of the pursuit being entered upon till it

had ended abortively, by the coming on of night.

Chancing to be in the Maza, the Colonel said, when word reached him of what had occurred in the *Callé de Plateros*, he made all haste to pursue with a squadron of Hussars. Why he took so many was, that he might be able to send a force along every road, in case it should be necessary.

He found the *escapados* had gone out by *El Nino Perdido*, the sergeant on guard there allowing them to go past.

“ See that he be put under arrest ! ”

“ He’s under arrest now, your Excellency. I had that done as I was returning.”

“ Proceed with your relation ! ”

Which Santander did, telling how he had followed the fugitive party along the San Angel Road, and there met a troop of Lancers from Chapultepec. Some field labourers had

seen a carriage turn off towards Coyoacan ; and taking that route he soon after came up with it. It was stopped on the roadside ; empty, horses gone, the harness strewed over the ground hacked and cut ; the *cochero* strapped to one of the wheels, and gagged with the handle of his whip !

When the man was released he could tell nothing more than that the four had mounted his horses, a pair upon each, and galloped off across the country, on a sort of bridle path, as if making for the San Antonio Road.

Turning in that direction, Santander soon discovered that they had entered into a tract of *chapparal* ; and while this was being searched for them, the unharnessed horses were observed rushing to and fro in frenzied gallop, riderless of course. When caught it was seen why they were now excited, one of them having its ear slit, the blood still dropping from the wound.

The *chapparal* was quartered in every direction ; but he soon came to the conclusion it was no use searching for them there.

“ *Carramba !* ” interrupted his listener ;
“ of course not ; I know the place well. And if you, Señor Colonel, were as well acquainted with that *chapparal*, and what lies alongside it, as one of those you were after, you’d have dropped the search sooner. You needn’t tell me more ; I can guess the finish ; they got off into the Pedregal.”

“ So it would seem, your Excellency.”

“ Seem ! So it is, *por cierto*. And looking for them there would be so much lost time. Around your native city, New Orleans, there are swamps where the runaway slave manages to hide himself. He’d have a better chance of concealment here, among rocks, in that same quarter you’ve just come from. It’s a very labyrinth. But

what did you afterwards? You may as well complete your narrative."

"There is not much more to tell, Sire; for little more could we do. The darkness came on, as we discovered they had taken to the rocks."

"You did discover that?"

"Yes, your Excellency. We found the place where they had gone up over a sort of cliff. There were scratches made by their feet, with a branch broken off one of the cactus plants; some of the sewer mud, too, was on the rock. But there was no path, and I saw it would be useless carrying the pursuit any further till we should have the light of morning. I've taken every precaution, however, to prevent their getting out of the Pedregal."

"What precautions?"

"By completely enfilading it, Sire. I sent

the Lancers round by San Geromino and Contreras; the Hussars to go in the opposite direction by San Augustin. They have orders to drop a picket at every path that leads from it, till they meet on the other side."

"Well, Señor Colonel, your strategy is good. I don't see that you could have done better under the circumstances. But it's doubtful whether we shall be able to trap our foxes in the Pedregal. One of them knows its paths too well to let night or darkness hinder his travelling along them. He'll be through it before your pickets can get to their stations. Yes; and off to a hiding-place he has elsewhere—a safer one—somewhere in the Sierras. Confound those Sierras with their caverns and forests. They're full of my enemies, rebels, and robbers. But I'll have them rooted out,

hanged, shot, till I clear the country of disaffection. *Carajo!* I shall be master of Mexico, not only in name, but deeds. Emperor in reality!"

Excited by the thought of unrestrained rule and dreams of vengeance—sweet to the despot as blood to the tiger—he sprang out of his chair, and paced to and fro, gesticulating in a violent manner.

"Yes, Senor Colonel!" he continued in tone satisfied as triumphant. "Other matters have hindered me from looking after these skulking proscripsts. But our victory over the Tejanos has given me the power now, and I intend using it. These men must be recaptured at all cost—if it take my whole army to do it. To you, Don Carlos Santander, I entrust the task—its whole management. You have my authority to requisition troops, and spend what-

ever money may be needed to ensure success. And," he added, stepping close to his subordinate, and speaking in a confidential way, "if you can bring me back Ruperto Rivas, or his head so that I can recognise it, I shall thank you not as *Colonel*, but as *General Santander*."


The expression upon his face, as he said this, was truly satanic. Equally so that on his to whom the horrid hint was given. Alike cruel in their instincts, with aims closely corresponding, it would be strange if the fugitive prisoners were not retaken.





CHAPTER XXXIX

UP THE MOUNTAIN.

“E'RE going to have a night black as charcoal,” said Rivas, running his eye along the outline of the Cordilleras and taking survey of the sky beyond.

“Will that be against us?” queried the young Irishman.

“In one way, yes; in another, for us. Our pursuers will be sure to ride all round the

Predegal, and leave a picket wherever they see the resemblance of path or trail leading out. If it were to come on moonlight—as luckily it won't—we'd had but a poor chance to get past them without being seen. And that would signify a fight against awkward odds—numbers, arms, everything. We must steal past somehow, and so the darkness will be in our favour.”

As may be deduced from this snatch of dialogue, they were still in the Pedregal. But the purple twilight was now around them, soon to deepen into the obscurity of night; sooner from their having got nearly across the lava field, and under the shadow of Ajusco, which, like a black wall, towered up against the horizon. They had stooped for a moment, Rivas himself cautiously creeping up to an elevated spot, and reconnoitering the ground in front.

“It will be necessary for us to reach the mountains before morning,” he added after a pause. “Were we but common gaol-birds who had bolted, it wouldn’t much signify, and we’d be safe here for days, or indeed for ever. The authorities of Mexico, such as they are at present, don’t show themselves very zealous in the pursuit of escaped criminals. But neither you nor I, Señor Kearney, come under that category—unluckily for us just now—and the Pedregal, labyrinth though it be, will get surrounded and explored—every inch of it within the next forty-eight hours. So out of it we must move this night, or never.”

Twilight on the table-lands of the western world is a matter of only a few minutes: and, while he was still speaking the night darkness had drawn around them. It hindered them not from proceeding onwards,

however, the Mexican once more leading off, after enforcing upon the others to keep close to him, and make no noise avoidable.

Another half hour of clambering over rocks, with here and there a scrambling through thickets of cactus, and he again came to a stop, all of course doing the same. This time to use their ears, rather than eyes; since around all was black as a pot of pitch, the nearest object, rock or bush, being scarcely visible.

For a time they stood listening intently. Not long, however, before hearing sounds—the voices of men—and seeing a glimmer of light, which rose in radiation above the crest of a low ridge at some distance ahead.

“*Un piquete!*” pronounced Rivas in a half-whisper.

“*Soto en la puerta—mozo!*” (knave in the door—winner) came a voice in a long

drawn accentuation, from the direction of the light.

“Good!” mutteringly exclaimed the Mexican, on hearing it. “They’re at their game of *monté*. While so engaged not much fear they’ll think of aught else. I know the spot they’re in, and a way that will take us round it. Come on, *camarados*! The trick’s ours!”

Sure enough it proved so. A path that showed no sign of having ever been trodden, but still passable, led out past the gambling soldiers, without near approach to them. And they were still absorbed in their game—as could be told by its calls every now and then drawled out, and sounding strange in that solitary place—Ruperto Rivas conducted his trio of companions clear of the Pedregal, and beyond the line of enfiladement.

In twenty minutes after they were mounting the steep slope of the Cerro Ajusco, amid

tall forest trees with no fear of pursuit by the soldiers, than if separated from them by a hundred long leagues.

After breasting the mountain for some time, they paused to take breath, Rivas saying :

“ Well, *caballeros*, we’re on safe ground now, and may rest a bit. It’s been a close shave, though ; and we may thank our stars there are none in the sky—nor moon. Look yonder ! They’re at it yet. ‘ *Soto en la puerto—mozo !* ’ Ha, ha, ha ! ”

He referred to a faint light visible at a long distance below, on the edge of the Pedregal, where they had passed that of a picket fire-camp, which enabled the *monté* players to make out the markings on their cards.

“ We may laugh who have won,” he added, now seemingly relieved from all apprehension of pursuit.

Nevertheless the fugitive party stayed but

a short while there ; just long enough to recover wind. The point they were making for was still further up the mountain, though none of them could tell where save Rivas himself. He knew the place and paths leading to it. And well ; otherwise he could not have followed them, so thick was the darkness. In daylight it would have been difficult enough, yawning chasms to be crossed *barransas*—with cliffs to be climbed, in comparison with which the escarpments of the Pedregal were but as garden walls.

In a groping way, hand helping hand, all were at length got up and over, as the tolling of distant church bells, down in the valley below, proclaimed the hour of midnight. Just then Rivas, once more making a stop, plucked a leaf from one of the grass plants growing by, and placing it between his lips gave out a peculiar sound, half screech, half whistle. A

signal as the others supposed ; being assured it was, by the response soon after reaching their ears.

The signal was given again, with some variations ; responded to in like manner. Then a further advance up the mountain, and still another halt ; this time at hearing the hail :

“ *Quein viva !* ”

“ *El Capitan !* ” called out Riyas in answer, and received for rejoinder first an exclamation of delighted surprise, then words signifying permission to approach and pass.

The approach was not so easy, being up a steep incline, almost a cliff. But on reaching its crest they came in sight of the man who had challenged, standing on a ledge of rock. A strange looking figure he seemed to Kearney and the Texan, wearing a long loose robe, girded at the waist—the garb of a monk, if the dim light was not deceiving them. Yet

with the air of a soldier and sentinel-fashion, carrying a gun !

He was at “present arms” when they got up opposite ; and wondering, but without saying aught, they passed him—their conductor, after a momentary pause and a muttered word to him, leading on as before.

Another ascent, this time short, but still almost precipitous, and this climbing came to an end.





CHAPTER XL.

A FAITHFUL STEWARD.



THE spot where they had now made stop—final for the night—was still far below the summit of the mountain. It was a sort of platform or bench, formed by the crest of a projecting spur, the cliff rising sheer at its back. Its level surface was only a few acres in extent, supporting a thick growth of tall evergreen pines, the long-leaved species indigenous to

Mexico. Centrally there was a place clear of timber, which ran up to the cliff's base, or rather to a building contiguous to it. In front of this they halted, Rivas saying :

“Behold my humble abode, *caballeros* ! Let me bid you welcome to it.”

There was light enough to let them see a massive pile of mason work outlined against the cliff's *facade*, while too dim for them to distinguish its features. They could make out, however, what appeared to be a pair of windows with pointed arches, and between them a large doorway, seeming more like the mouth of a cavern. Out of this came a faint scintillation of light ; and as they drew up to it, a candle could be seen burning inside a sort of covered porch resembling the lych-gate of a country church. There were some stone benches outside, from one of which a man started up and advanced toward

them, as he did so putting the formal question :—

“ *Quien es !* ”

“ *Yo Gregorio !* ” was the answer given by Rivas.

“ *El Capitan !* ” exclaimed the questioner, in a tone also telling of pleased surprise. “ And free again ! I’m so glad, Don Ruperto ! Praise to the Lord for delivering you ! ”

“ Thanks, good Gregorio ! And while you’re about it you may as well give part of your praise to a lady, who had something to do with it—indeed two of them.”

“ Ah ! Senor Capitan ; I think I know one of them anyhow, and in all Mexico I can say—aye, swear it— ”

“ True, true ! ” interrupted the Captain. “ But stay your asseveration. There’s no time to talk about the Senoritas now. My friends and I are in want of something to eat. We’re

as hungry as *coyotes*. What have you got in the larder ? ”

“ Not much, I fear, your worship. And the cook’s gone to bed, with everybody else. But they’ll only be too delighted to get up when they hear it’s your worship come back. Shall I go and rouse them, Señor ? ”

“ No, no. Let them sleep it out. Any cold thing will do for us. We’re as much fatigued as famished, and wish to be in bed ourselves, as soon as possible. So look out whatever eatables there are, and don’t forget the drinkables. I trust the cellar isn’t as low as the larder.”

“ No, Señor. Of that I can speak with more confidence. Not a cork has been drawn since you left us—I mean of the best wines. Only the common Canario was drunk in your absence.”

“ In that case, mayor-domo, we may sup

satisfactorily, so far as the liquids are concerned, should the solids prove deficient. Bring a bottle of Burgundy, another of the Brown Madeira, and, let me see—yes, one of old Pedro Ximenes. I suppose the brethren have used up all my best cigars ? ”

“ Not one of them, Señor. The Havannahs have been under lock and key, too. I gave out only *puros*.”

“ What a faithful steward you’ve proved yourself, Gregorio ! Well, along with the wine, let us have a bundle of Imperadores. We haven’t tasted tobacco for days, and are all dying for a smoke.”

By this time they had entered the porch, and were passing on through a long corridor, still more dimly illuminated. But there was light issuing from a side-door, which stood open. By this Rivas made stop, with word and gesture signifying to the others to pass on

inside, which they did. Not all of them, however; only Kearney and Rock. A different disposition he meant making of the dwarf than giving him Burgundy and Madeira to drink, with the smoking of "Emperor" cigars. Pointing to the crooked semblance of humanity, at which Gregorio was gazing with a puzzled air, he whispered to the latter,

"Take the beast back, and shut him up in one of the cells. You may give him something to eat, but see to his being securely kept. Insignificant as he looks, there's mischief in him, and he might take it into his head to stray. You comprehend, Gregorio?"

"I do, your worship. I'll take care to stow him safe."

Saying which, the mayor-domo of the establishment, for such Gregorio was, caught the hunchback by one of his ears—grand auricles they were—and led him away along

the corridor, with the prison chain trailing behind.

Rivas did not stay till they were out of sight; but turning, stepped inside the room into which he had ushered the other two.

It was rather a large apartment, but plainly and sparsely furnished; a deal table and half-a-dozen common chairs, with leathern backs and bottoms, such as may be seen in most Mexican houses. It was better supplied with arms than household effects; several guns standing in corners, with swords hanging against the walls, and a variety of accoutrements—all giving it more the appearance of a guard-house than the reception-room of a gentleman's mansion.

“Now, *amigos*,” said the Mexican, after rejoining his guests, on whose faces he could not fail to note an odd inquiring expression, “I can at last say to you, feel safe, if I can’t

assure you of a supper good as I'd wish to give. Still, if I mistake not, 'twill be superior to our prison fare. *Por Dios!* Having to put up with that was punishment enough of itself, without being set to work in the sewers."

"Ah," remarked Kearney, speaking for himself and the Texan, "Had you been one of us prisoners, from Mier up to Mexico, the diet you complain of would have seemed luxury for Lucullus."

"Indeed! What did they give you to eat?"

"Brown beans only half boiled, *tortillas*, usually cold; and sometimes for a whole stretch of twenty-four hours nothing at all."

"*Carramba!*" exclaimed the Mexican. "That was hard usage. But nothing to surprise. Just as Santa Anna might be expected to treat his captive enemies, whether of his

own people, or as yourselves, foreigners. More cruel tyrant never ruled country. But his reign, thank Heaven, will not be long. I've reason for saying that, and better still for thinking it."

The little interlude of dialogue was brought to a close by the entrance of the mayor-domo loaded with bottles and glasses. He had orders to bring the wine first, the cigars along with it.

Lumping all down upon the table, he left them to wait upon themselves, while he went off to ransack the pantry, soon to return with a sufficiency of viands, and savoury enough to satisfy men who had just come out of the Acordada. There was cold mutton, ham, and venison, maize bread, and "guesas de Gaute-mala," with a variety of fruit to follow. Verily a supper at which even a gourmand might not cavil ; though it was but the *debris*

of a dinner which seemed to have been partaken of by a goodly array of guests.

Not long lingered they over it, before whom it was set a second time. Overcome by the toil and struggle of days, and more the mental worry attendant, even the wine freely quaffed failed to excite them afresh. Rest and sleep they more needed and much desired ; all glad when Gregorio again showed his face at the door, saying :


“ *Caballeros*, your sleeping rooms are ready.”





CHAPTER XLI.

ANXIOUS HOURS.

“EE, Lusita? Yonder go soldiers!”

“Where?”

“Along the calzada of Niño Perdido—under the trees—by the thick clump—they’re galloping!”

“*Santissima*, yes! I see them now. O Isabel! if they overtake the carriage! *Ay Dios!*”

“*Ay Dios*, indeed! It’s to be hoped they

won't, though. And I have less fear of it now than ever. It must have gone that way, or the soldiers wouldn't be there; and as it couldn't have stopped at the *garita* it should now be a good distance on. Keep up your heart, *amiga mia*, as I do mine. They'll soon be safe, if they're not yet."

This exclamatory dialogue was carried on while the alarm bells were still ringing and the guns booming. The speakers were on the azotea of Don Ignacio's house, up to which they had hastened soon as home—having dismissed their escort below, and left orders for no visitors to be admitted.

In the *mirador*, with opera-glasses to their eyes, they had been scanning the roads which led south and south-west from the city. Only for a few minutes, as they had but just got back, and as the carriage having already rounded the turning to Cayoacan,

they saw but the pursuing soldiers. Those were the Hussars, with Santander at their head, though the ladies knew not that.

Fortified by the hopeful speech of the Condesa, the other responded to it with an added word of hope, and a prayer for the safe escape of those they were concerned about.

Then for a while both remained silent, with the lorgnettes to their eyes, following the movements of the soldiers along the road. Soon these were out of sight, but their whereabouts could be told by the cloud of white dust which rose over the trees, gradually drifting farther and farther off.

At length it too disappeared, settling down; and as the bells ceased to ring and the cannon to be fired, the city, with all around it, seemed restored to its wonted tranquillity.

But not so the breasts of Luisa Valverde and Ysabel Almontè. Far from tranquil they ; instead, filled with anxiety, keen as ever. And now, as much on their own account as for those they had been aiding to escape. In their haste to effect this, they had taken no thought of what was to come after. But it was now forced upon them. As they looked back on what they had themselves done—the part they had been playing, with all its details of action—apprehensions hitherto unfelt began to steal over them, growing stronger the longer they dwelt upon them.

For what would be the upshot of all ?

What if the carriage got overtaken with the fugitives in it, and beside them those knives and pistols, to say nothing of the file ? A gentleman's cloak too, with *mango* and *serape* ! Odd assortment of articles for

ladies to take out on an airing! They had no fear of the *cochero* betraying them; but this paraphernalia surely would, if it fell into the hands of the pursuers. They might expect investigation, anyhow; but these things, if produced, would bring about an exposure unavoidable.

No wonder at their soon becoming seriously alarmed, henceforth nervously agitated. And they had no one to take council with. Soon after their coming home, Don Ignacio, seeing and hearing of what happened, had sallied forth to make inquiries, and direct pursuit. Furious about his fine carriage and horses carried off, he little dreamt that along with them were his duelling pistols and blue broad-cloth cloak.

Nor would it do to tell him of those matters; unless they made up their minds to confess all, and fling themselves on his affec-

tion, more than his mercy. Of course, he was still in the dark about their doings—unsuspicious man—had not even been told who the *forzados* were that had taken away his equipage.

Closeted alone, for some time the alarmed ladies could not think of what they ought to do. They did not yield to despair, however; instead, kept on scheming and considering how they might meet the worst—if the worst came.

But one way seemed plausible—even possible—that depending on Don Ignacio. If they could prevail on him to tell a falsehood all might be well. Only to say the carriage had been made ready for a journey to his *casa de campo*, whither he had intended to proceed that same evening, taking his daughter and the Condesa along with him. That would explain the presence of the weapons; no uncommon thing—rather the rule—for

carriage travellers to take such with them, even going but outside the suburbs of the city. For good reason ; there being footpads and robbers everywhere. And the cloaks for protection against the night air !

In this way they groped about, as drowning people clutch at sticks and straws. Still, without being able to get rid of their apprehensions. Even should Don Ignacio agree to the deception they thought of—he would, no doubt, when made aware of their danger—it was questionable whether it would serve them. For there was a file too—a small matter, but a most conspicuous link in the chain of circumstantial evidence against them. They in the carriage would have been using it, before being taken—if they should be taken. Finally, the worst of all, the relations known to exist between themselves and two of the men attempting escape.

A miserable time it was for them during the remainder of that afternoon and evening ; a struggle amid doubts, fears, and conjectures. Nor did Don Ignacio's return home in any way relieve them. They were not yet prepared to surrender up their secret even to him. The time had not come for that.

As the hours passed things began to look better, and the suspense easier to bear. No report from the pursuers, which there would, or should, have been were the pursued overtaken.

Something better still, at length. José back home with the carriage and horses, and nothing besides—no weapons nor spare wraps ! All gone off, the tell-tale file along with them.

Pepita brought this intelligence into the ladies, who longed to have a private interview with the *cochero*. But he had first to deliver

his to Don Ignacio, who had sallied out into the stables to receive it.

A strange tale it was, imparted to an angry listener, who, while listening, looked upon his costly harness, patched and mended with ropes, where it had been cut. His fine *frisones* too, abused, possibly injured for good, the ear of one of them well nigh severed from the head ! Slow to wrath though he was, this was enough to make him wrathful, without the further knowledge of his other losses, about which José took care *not* to enlighten him.

At a later hour the circumspect *cochero* told his tale to other ears in terms somewhat different, and with incidents. His master, summoned to the palace, gave the opportunity so much desired by his young mistress and the Condesa for speaking with him ; and he was soon in their presence, getting interrogated with a volubility which made sober reply almost impossible.

His questioners, however, after a time calming down, listened to his narration in a detailed form, though not without repeated interruptions. He told them about the slow driving of the carriage along the garden wall of San Francisco, the putting on the disguises, and how cleverly they had outwitted the guard at the *garita*.

“Like Ruperto !” at this juncture exclaimed the Countess.

Then, of their onward course along the *calzada*, horses in a gallop, till stopped on the Coyoacan road, with the action taken there—quick as it was varied and strange.

Dona Luisa, in her turn, here interrupted in triumphant exclamation—

“Like Florencio !”

In fine, when made known to them how the fugitives had mounted and ridden off, both cried out together in terms almost the same—

“Thanks to the Virgin, blessed Mother of God ! We now know they are safe.”

Their confidence was strengthened by further questioning ; for the trusted *cochero* was able to tell them more. How his horses had been caught and brought back to him by two hussars—one of whom he chanced to have a speaking acquaintance with. From the soldier he had learnt all about the pursuit after it had passed beyond him ; how they had searched the *chapparal*, with fruitless result ; the latest reports being that the *éscapados* had got into the Pedregal.

That was enough for the Countess, who springing to her feet and clapping her hands, cried out :

“Joy, Luisita ! They’re safe, I’m sure. Ruperto knows the Pedregal, every path through it, as well as we the walks of the Alameda. I shall sleep this night better than the last, and you may do the same.”

So assured, Luisa Valverde, devout as was her wont, responded with a phrase of thanksgiving, arms crossed over her bosom, eyes turned to the picture of Santa Guadalupe on the wall.

José stood waiting, not for any reward. Recompense for the service he had done them—so modestly declaring it—was not in his thoughts at that moment, though it might be after. But the Condesa was thinking of it then. Sure to promise and contract, she said to him—

“Faithful fellow ;—courageous as faithful—take this : you’ve fairly earned it.”

Whilst speaking she drew the jewelled watch from her waist, and, passing the chain over her head, held it out to him.

“And this too !” added the Donna Luisa, plucking a diamond ring from one of her fingers, and presenting it at the same time.

“No !” protested the faithful servitor. “Neither the one nor the other. Enough reward to me to know I’ve done your ladyship a service—if I have.”

“But, good José,” urged the Countess, “you must either take my watch or the worth of it in gold *doblones* ! That was the understanding, and I shall insist on your adhering to it.”

“*Muy bein, Condesa* ; I consent to that. But only on the condition that the gentleman get safe off. Till we’re sure of that, I beg your ladyship won’t look upon me as a creditor.”

“If her ladyship should,” here put in a third personage of the sex feminine, who had just entered upon the scene, “If she should, I’ll pay the debt myself. I pay it now—there !”

It was Pepita who thus delivered herself,

as she did so bounding forward, flinging her arms around his neck, and giving him a sonorous kiss upon the cheek ! Then, as she released her lips after the smack, adding :


“ I’ve given you that, *hombre*, for what ? Why nothing more than doing your duty. Ha-ha-ha ! ”

The laughter neither disconcerted nor vexed him. It was not scornful ; while the kiss had been very sweet. Long coveted, but hitherto withheld, he looked upon it as an earnest of many others to follow, with a reward he would more value than all the watches and rings in Mexico—the possession of Pepita herself.



CHAPTER XLII.

A HOLY BROTHERHOOD.

“ HERE the deuce am I ?”

It was Florence Kearney who asked this question, interrogating himself ; time, the morning after their retreat up the mountain. He was lying on a low pallet, or rather bench of mason work, with a palm mat spread over it, his only coverlet the cloak he had brought with him from Don Ignacio's carriage. The room was of smallest dimensions, some eight or nine feet square,

pierced by a single window, a mere pigeon-hole without sash or glass.

He was yet only half awake, and, as his words show, with but a confused sense of his whereabouts. His brain was in a whirl from the excitement through which he had been passing; so long sustained. Every thing around seemed weird and dream-like.

Rubbing his eyes to make sure it was a reality, and raising his head from the hard pillow, he took stock of what the room contained. An easy task that. Only a rickety chair, on which lay a pair of duelling pistols—one of the pairs found under the carriage cushions—and his hat hanging on its elbow. Not a thing more except a bottle, greasy around the neck, from a tallow candle that had guttered and burnt out, standing on the uncarpeted stone floor beside his own boots, just as he had drawn them off.

Why he had not noticed these surroundings on the night before was due to extreme fatigue and want of sleep. Possibly, the Burgundy, mixed with the Madeira and Old Pedro Ximenes, had something to do with it. In any case he had dropped down upon the mat of palm, and became oblivious, almost on the moment of his entering this strange sleeping chamber, to which the major-domo had conducted him.

“Queer crib it is,” he continued to soliloquise, after making survey of the room and its containings, “for a bed-room. I don’t remember ever having slept in so small a one, except aboard ship, or in a prison-cell. How like the last it looks !”

It did somewhat, though not altogether. There were points of difference, as a niche in the wall, with a plaster cast on a plinth, apparently the image of some saint, with

carvings in the woodwork, crosses, and other emblems of piety.

“It must be an old convent or monastery,” he thought, after noticing these. “Here in Mexico they often have them in odd, out-of-the-way places, I’ve heard. Out of the way this place surely is, considering the climb we’ve had to reach it. Monks in it too?” he added, recalling the two men he had seen on the preceding night, and how they were habited. “A strange sort they seem, with a *captain* at their head—my prison companion! Well, if it give us sanctuary, as he appears to think it will, I shall be but too glad to join the holy brotherhood.”

He lay a little longer, his eyes running around the room, to note that the rough limewash on its walls had not been renewed for years; green moss had grown upon them, and there were seams at the corners, stains

showing where rain-water had run down. If a monastery, it was evidently not one in the enjoyment of present prosperity, whatever it might have been in the past.

While still dreamily conjecturing about it, the door of his room was gently pushed ajar, and so held by whoever had opened it. Turning his head round, Kearney saw a man in long loose robes, with sandalled feet and shaven crown, girdle of beads, crucifix, cowl, and scapular—in short, the garb of the monk with all its insignia.

“I have come to inquire how you have slept, my son,” said the holy man, on seeing that he was awake. “I hope that the pure atmosphere of this, our mountain home—so different from that you’ve been so lately breathing—will have proved conducive to your slumbers.”

“Indeed, yes,” rejoined he inquired after,

conscious of having slept well. "I've had a good night's rest—the best allowed me for a long time. But where——"

While speaking, he had dropped his feet to the floor, and raised himself erect on the side of the bed, thus bringing him face to face with the friar. What caused him to leave the interrogatory unfinished was a recognition. The countenance he saw was a familiar one, as might be expected after having been so close to his own—within a few feet of it—for days past. No disguise of dress, nor changed tonsure, could hinder identification of the man who had partaken of his chain in the *Acordada*; for he it was.

"Oh! 'Tis you, Don Ruperto!" exclaimed Kearney suddenly changing tone.

"The same, my son," rejoined the other, with an air of mock gravity.

At which the young Irishman broke out into a loud guffaw, saying :—

“ Well, you’re the last man I should ever have supposed to be a monk !”

He recalled some strong denunciations of the Holy Brethren he had heard pass the lips of his late fellow prisoner.

“ Ah ! Señor Don Florencio, in this our world of Mexico, we are called upon to play many parts, and make our home in many places. Yesterday, you knew me as a prisoner, like yourself in a loathsome gaol ; to-day, you see me in a monastery. And no common monk, but an Abbot ; for know, *amijo mio*, that I am the head of this establishment. But come ! As your host I am not now playing the part I should. You must be half famished ; besides your toilet needs attending to. For the first, breakfast will be ready by the time you have looked to the last. Here

Gregorio!" this was a call to the major-domo outside, who instantly after appeared at the door. "Conduct this gentleman to the lavatory, and assist him in making his ablutions." Then again to Kearney: "If I mistake not, you will find a clean shirt there, with some other changes of raiment. And may I ask you to be expeditious? It has got to be rather a late hour for breakfast, and the Holy Brethren will be getting a little impatient for it. But, no doubt, your appetite will prompt you. *Hasta Luego!*"

With which salutation—The Mexican custom at parting for only a short while—he passed out of the room leaving his guest to be looked after by Gregorio.

Surrendering himself to the major-domo, Kearney was conducted to an outer room, in which he found a wash-stand and dressing table, with towel and other toilet articles—

all, however, of the commonest kind. Even so, they were luxuries that had been long denied him—especially the water, a constant stream of which ran into a stone basin from some pure mountain spring.

And, sure enough, the clean shirt was there, with a full suit of clothes; velveteen jacket, *calzoneras calzoncillas*, scarf of China crape—in short, the complete costume of a *ranchero*. A man of medium size, they fitted him nicely; and arrayed in them he made a very handsome appearance.

“Now, your honour,” said the individual in charge of him, “allow me to show you the Refectory.”

Another turn along the main passage brought them to the door, from which issued a buzz of voices. His host had prepared him to expect company, and on stepping inside this door, he saw in the shape of some twenty-

five or thirty men, all in the garb of monks of the same order as Rivas himself.

The room was a large one, saloon-shape, with a table standing centrally, around which were benches and chairs. A cloth was spread upon it, with a multifarious and somewhat heterogeneous array of ware—bottles and glasses being conspicuous. For it was after eleven o'clock, and the meal *almuerzo*, as much dinner as breakfast. The viands were being put upon it; three or four Indian youths, not in convent dress, passing them through a *hatch* that communicated with the kitchen, and from which also came a most appetising odour.

All this the young Irishman took in with a sweep of his eye, which instantly after became fixed upon the friars who had faced towards him. They were standing in two or three groups, the largest gathered round

an individual who towered above all of them, by the head and shoulders. Cris Rock it was, clean shaven, and looking quite respectable ; indeed, better dressed than Kearney had seen him since he left off his New Orleans "store" clothes. The Colossus was evidently an object of great interest to his new acquaintances ; and, from the farcical look upon their faces, it was clear they had been doing their best to "draw" him. With what success Kearney could not tell ; though from the knowledge he had of his old comrade's cleverness he suspected not much. There was just time for him to note the jovial air of the Brethren, so little in keeping with the supposed gravity of the monastic character, when the Abbot entering led him up to them, and gave him a general introduction.

"*Hermanos !*" he said, "let me present another of my comrades in misfortune, the

Señor Don Florencio Kearney—an *Irlandes*—who claims the hospitality of the convent.”

They all made bows, some pressing forward, and extending hands.

But there was no time for dallying over salutations. By this several dishes had been passed through the hatch and were steaming upon the table. So the Abbot took seat at its head, Kearney beside him; while the Texan was bestowed at its foot, alongside one who seemed to act as vice-chairman.

If the table-cloth was not of the finest damask, nor the ware costliest china and cut glass, the repast was worthy of such. In all the world there is no *cuisine* superior to that of Mexico. By reason of certain aboriginal viands, which figured on the table of that Aztec sybarite, Montezuma, it beats the *cuisine* of old Spain, on which that of France is founded, and but an insipid imitation.

The monks of this mountain retreat evidently knew how to live; course after course being passed through the hatch in a variety which seemed as if it would never end. There were pucheros, guisados, tamales, and half a score of other dishes Kearney had never before heard of, much less tasted. No wonder at their dinner of the preceding day having left such *debris* for supper.

And the wines were in correspondence—in quality, profusion, everything. To Kearney it recalled “Bolton Abbey in the olden time”. Nor ever could the monks of that ancient establishment on the Wharfe have drunk better wines, or laughed louder while quaffing them, than they whose hospitality he was receiving on the side of the Cerro Ajusco.

Some strange speech, however, he heard passing around him, little in consonance with what might be supposed to proceed from the

lips of religious men. But, possibly, just such as came from those of the Tintern and Bolton Brethern when around the refectory table. Not all of it, though. If the talk was worldly, it savoured little of wickedness—far less than that of the cowed fraternity of olden times, if chronicles are to be trusted. And never in convent hall could have been heard such toast as that with which the breakfast was brought to a close, when Rivas rising to his feet, goblet in hand, the others standing up along with him, cried out :

“ *Patriay Libertad !* ”

Country and Liberty ! Strange sentiment in such a place, and to be received with acclaim by such people !

